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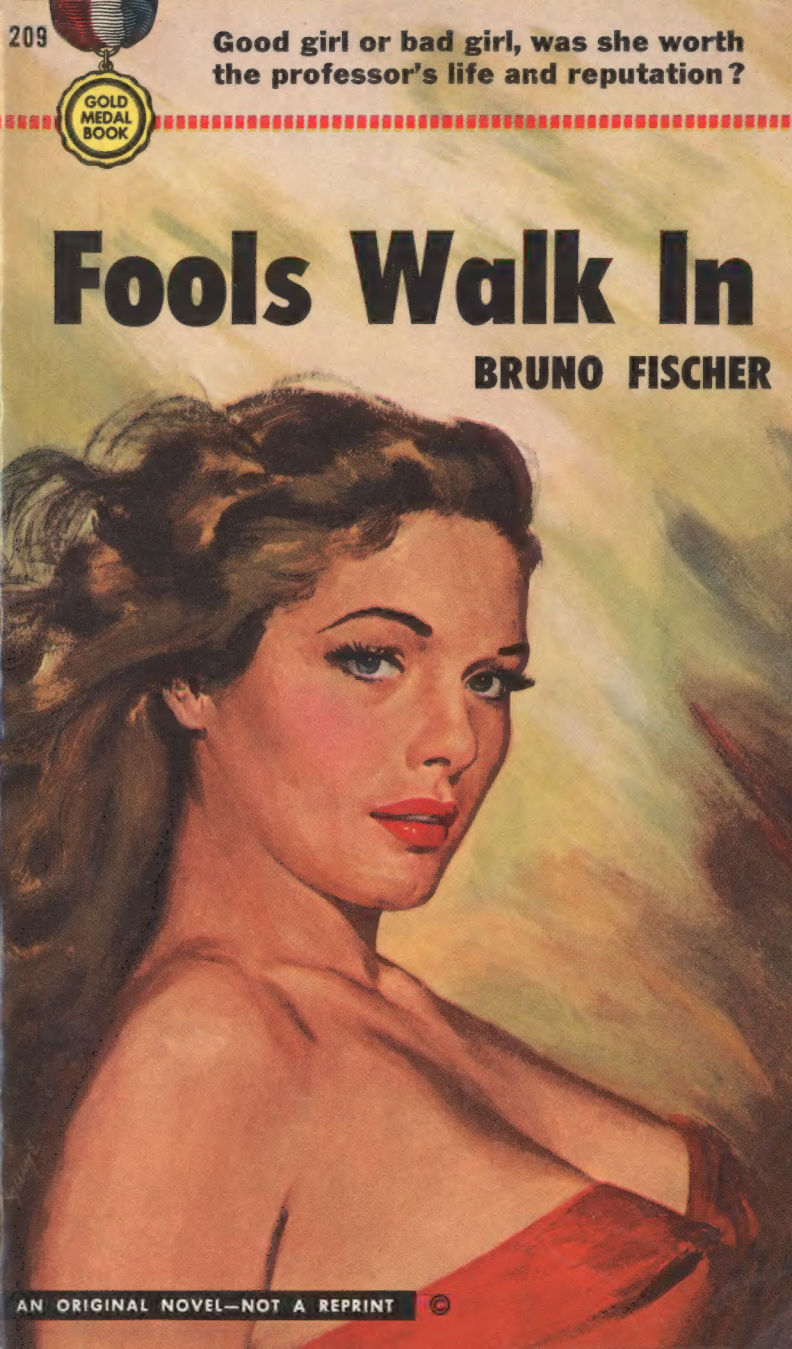
GOLD MEDAL BOOK

Good girl or bad girl, was she worth the professor's life and reputation?

Fools Walk In

BRUNO FISCHER



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The back of her head was toward me, her hair fluffy to the neck of the yellow dress. She was listening to the fat boy saying that Cabin 3 had a double bed with an inner-spring mattress and would cost three and a half dollars. And then this girl whom I had met only short hours ago said brightly, "My husband and I will take it. . . ."

The boy spread open a register and thrust a fountain pen at me. I stared down at the blur of names. I was aware of the rules. When a respectable, right-thinking, right-living citizen like myself hired a room for the night with a girl who wasn't his wife, convention required a false name. For a moment I hesitated. . . .

I wasn't sure who or what I was defying by signing my real name. Then with a stroke of the pen I severed a chain. With a flourish I wrote, "Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence B. Knight, N.Y.C."

By the same author:

HOUSE OF FLESH

THE LADY KILLS

Fools Walk In

BRUNO FISCHER

A GOLD MEDAL ORIGINAL

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Chapter One

IN THE late afternoon it started to rain, a pin-point drizzle that broke the July humidity. By then I was well into Virginia, rolling east down the mountains on a secondary road my brother George had recommended as a short cut. The gas-gauge needle hovered close to empty. I saw pumps ahead and slowed and swung off the road.

The filling station looked very lonely in the rain. A low wooden shack that hadn't been painted in a generation sagged behind a pair of ancient pumps. Nobody was in sight. The only other car was a twenty-year-old Model A Ford resting off its rear tireless wheels on two milk boxes.

My horn brought no stirring inside the shack or out. I felt remote and isolated sitting there. I got out to stretch my legs, and the rain was like heavy mist on my face and hair.

I was moving to the shack when I noticed the woman watching me.

She stood among the trees and brush that formed a backdrop to the filling station, and she was so still that she would have blended with the dark foliage if her dress hadn't been bright yellow. Her face was obscured by an overhanging bough; all I could distinguish of it was that it was turned to me.

"Is there anybody here to sell gas?" I called to her.

She didn't answer. The yellow dress drew back deeper among the trees, disappearing.

A wizened old man with one suspender indifferently holding up droopy pants came out of the shack. He contemplated my New York license plate as if dubious that any car to which it belonged could mean business for him. The few outstate cars that took this road would breeze by to tank up at the snappy, efficient layouts in the towns.

"Ten," I said, handing him the key.

The pump handle creaked as he laboriously turned it.

Again I saw the yellow dress—a piece of it, a patch from hip to hem, like a splash of sunlight in the rain. She had resumed watching me without letting herself be wholly seen.

I wondered where she could have come from. There was no house on either side of the road and no parked car but the disabled Ford. If she belonged to the shack, she wouldn't make it a point to keep away from a customer. She was acting like a shy little backwoods girl spying on a stranger, but what I could observe of her figure was adult, and that was a pretty good city dress she was ruining in the wet brush. So here was a random mystery that would likely never be solved for me because in another minute I would be gone.

"Is there a town nearby?" I asked the old man.

"Darson. Three miles that way."

"I came from there and passed nothing. Darson's a fair-sized city, isn't it?"

"It's off the road a piece. Crossroads a mile back. You shoulda turned right."

"I don't want Darson. I'm merely curious."

He took another look at the license plate. "Bound back to New York?"

"Yes."

"Well, mister, you follow this road to U.S. One and that'll take you to Richmond and all the way to New York."

"I know," I said.

He hung up and fished change for a five out of his sagging pants and shuffled back into the shack.

As I was about to get into my car I looked back. The girl in the yellow dress had come out of the woods.

Wind fluttered her shoulder-length hair across her face, glistening with rain. She was carrying a large tan valise. Both her hands gripped the handle and the weight pulled down her right shoulder. She was leggy and slim-bodied and quite young.

I went up to her. "Let me give you a hand."

"That's O.K." Panting a little, she clung to the valise. "I can use a lift to Richmond."

She didn't ask me if I were going there. She already knew, because she had heard me tell the old man, and it occurred to me that perhaps that was why she had come out of hiding.

"Of course," I said, and reached for the valise.

She twisted away, swinging the valise with her as if to prevent me from snatching it. The straw handbag she wore slung from her shoulder slapped her hip as she lugged the valise to the car. About all I could do to be a gentleman was to hurry ahead and open the right door. She pushed the valise in behind the seat and pulled the seat down and settled herself into it. I closed the door and walked around the car and slipped behind the wheel.

"I suppose you got caught in the rain," I said to make conversation as we drove.

"Somebody was supposed to meet me and didn't show up."

I didn't ask her if that were the reason she had been lurking in the woods. I said, "Do you come from Darson?"

"No, I don't."

She fluffed out her hair as if to dry it that way. Her yellow piqué dress clung damply to a tight figure. If she had been older, I might have become more subjective about her, but she was too close in age to the girls in my English classes to take personally or seriously. To me they were all children to be regarded with tolerance and amusement, which may have been a protective attitude assumed by a bachelor who during his working hours was surrounded by too much blatant young femininity.

I kept glancing sidelong at her. Eighteen? Her eyes, a shade lighter brown than her hair, had a limpid innocence, and her small mouth was naïve, though all of it—mouth, eyes, cheeks—was too overpainted for my taste. At the moment she was occupied in renewing the paint. She had her straw handbag open on her lap and had taken out compact, lipstick, rouge.

I said, "Do you mean that somebody abandoned you on that empty road in the rain?"

"Well, not exactly."

Evidently she didn't care to explain and I had no right to persist. We were, after all, strangers who after a very few hours would never again see each other.

The cosmetics were back in her bag. Her mouth had become redder, larger, more sensuous, but it was still an adolescent mouth.

Older than eighteen, I thought. Possibly as much as twenty-two, which would make her a woman to think of as a woman. A man, at any rate, could play around with notions.

She bent to finger her shoes. "They're sopping," she declared, and proceeded to remove them. Mud covered the heels and grass stains stippled the natural-colored linen. She sat up and reached under her skirt and unfastened a stocking and began to peel it off.

In the close confines of the car that act had a kind of intimacy.

"I'll stop the car so you can get dry things out of your valise," I offered.

"Don't bother."

"It will take only a minute."

"I'm O.K.," she said sharply, irritably.

She was unfastening the second stocking. I glanced down at a long, rounded thigh and then quickly looked away. Normally I didn't embarrass easily, and it was foolish to be embarrassed by a smooth, bare thigh, but there it was.

I felt her stir and took my gaze off the road. She had pulled up her bare legs under her, sitting on them, and her knees almost touched me. The hem of the dress negligently remained a good six inches above the knees.

"You got a cigarette?" she said. "I ran out."

When I handed her my pack, she asked if I wanted her to light one for me. I said yes. She stuck two between her lips and applied the dashboard lighter to each in turn and gave me one. I tasted the flavored stickiness of her

lipstick on the cigarette, like the lingering residue of a kiss.

The rain gathered volume. As I peered through the whirl of it in front of the windshield, I thought of how she had been hiding in the woods and how she had refused to let the valise out of her hand for an instant and how she had turned short-tempered when I had suggested that she get dry stockings and shoes out of it.

On impulse I said, "What's so valuable in your valise?"

Her eyes went wide and startled under the severely plucked eyebrows.

"What're you getting at?" she demanded.

"I didn't intend to frighten you."

"I ain't scared. Maybe just a bit upset because I had to wait in the rain." She touched my arm; I felt her knees against my right hip. "Sorry I snapped at you. You're a sweet guy."

I was flustered at her words, at her closeness, at her bare legs. And I regretted that she withdrew her hand, that she shifted along the seat to the other end, where she lounged against the door.

Miles passed in silence. A direction signpost at a crossroad said thirty-four miles to Richmond. She looked back at it and then at me.

"Mind if I stick with you all the way to New York?" she said.

"I intend to stop overnight pretty soon."

"That's O.K. by me. But I bet we can make New York by morning if we take turns driving all night."

I glanced at her. "Are you running away from somebody or something?"

"What an idea!" Her laugh was a brief explosion of breath. "I figured on taking the train from Richmond and hitting New York by morning, but I'd just as soon stick with you." She exhaled smoke through her nostrils. "But maybe you don't want my company."

"I'm delighted," I said. "If we're going to spend that much time together, let's introduce each other. My name is Larry Knight."

"Hello, Larry. I'm Jeanie. Go on, say it: Jeanie with the light-brown hair. Everybody does. That's why I'm thinking of dying my hair."

"You must have more name than just Jeanie."

She hesitated. "Jeanie King."

I wondered if so far she had told me the truth about anything.

She stretched her legs, pushing her bare feet against the floor board. Her toenails were painted, though not as deeply red as her fingernails. She put her head against the seat and for a long time studied me. I became self-conscious.

"Are you married?" she asked presently.

"Why ask?"

"You look like a guy who'd have a nice little wife and a couple of cute kids."

She sounded like my sister-in-law insisting that I was the type that required a real home complete with wife and children.

"So far I haven't even got started," I said.

And as a man will when he finds himself alone with a pretty girl, I spoke about myself. I told her that I was returning from a visit to my brother George and his family in Kentucky, that I lived with my sister in the borough of Queens in New York City, that I taught high-school English.

"You a schoolteacher!" Jeanie exclaimed. "I never would've guessed."

"It's a job."

"A good-looking guy like you teaching English!" The idea, for a reason completely beyond my understanding, amused her. "I left after the first year of high school," she said. "If they'd had teachers as good-looking as you, I bet I would've hung on."

"Where did you attend school?"

That killed the topic. "Oh, out west," she replied vaguely, and lit another cigarette and was silent.

When we entered Richmond, I suggested stopping to eat.

Jeanie stared at the business street through which we were rolling. "I'm not hungry yet. Let's wait till we reach Washington."

"I prefer to stop for the night before Washington."

"Well, I'm not hungry."

The storm had faded off; the rain-washed streets of Richmond and the fields that followed smelled wetly fresh. We drove without words. Jeanie smoked one cigarette after another. When she had exhausted the pack, I told her there was another in the glove compartment and she started on that. And all the time she was watching me, as if weighing me in some sort of balance of her own.

Twilight spread over the open highway. I turned on the headlights. The panel light didn't reach her. Her figure dimmed, receded, and for the next half hour it would have been like driving alone if I hadn't been so acutely conscious of her femininity in that clinging dress.

We approached a motor court that had a roadside lunchroom as part of a row of wooden cabins.

"How about this?" I said. "We can eat here as well as sleep."

"It looks clean." She slipped her feet into her shoes and picked up her stockings.

I pulled up in front of the lunchroom. A roly-poly boy came out. My side of the car was away from him, and when Jeanie opened her door he went over to her.

"Have you a cabin for two?" she said.

I opened my mouth and closed it without saying anything.

The back of her head remained toward me, her hair fluffy to the neck of the yellow dress. She was listening to the fat boy saying that Cabin 3 had a double bed with an inner-spring mattress and would cost three and a half dollars. And she said brightly, "My husband and I will take it."

I waited for her to face me, but she didn't.

The boy spoke to me past her. "You sign the register inside."

I ran suddenly sweaty hands around the curve of the

wheel and then got out of the car and followed the fat boy. At the lunchroom entrance I looked back. She had closed the car door, with herself inside.

A couple of men were being served at the lunchroom counter by a weary-looking middle-aged woman. The boy went behind the counter and spread open a register and thrust a fountain pen at me. I stared down at the blur of names. The last was a scrawl that looked like John something from Boston.

"You gonna sign it?" the boy said impatiently.

I was aware of the rules. When a respectable, right-thinking, right-living citizen like myself hired a bed for the night with a girl who wasn't his wife, convention required a false name. I wrote the date, then hesitated. I could sense the boy's boredom; he wasn't concerned with my morals, which he probably suspected, but with three and a half dollars.

Suddenly I grinned. With a flourish I wrote: "Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence B. Knight, New York, N.Y."

I wasn't sure who or what I was defying by signing my real name. Maybe a school system that hemmed in its underpaid servants with inhibitions; maybe my sister Marjorie; maybe simply myself. The fact remained that I felt daring and exhilarated, as if with a stroke of the pen I had severed a chain.

The boy accepted my money and muttered, "Cabin Three, key's in the door, towels and soap in the bathroom," and wandered off.

When I got outside, my car wasn't there.

I stood in the emptiness between me and the road, and for a long moment I felt ridiculous. She hadn't wanted me or even needed me. She had been after my car and she had gone through that act to get me out of it so that she could steal it.

I took a few steps from the squat lunchroom building and looked about. In the glare of the floodlights I saw my coupé parked alongside one of the cabins. My breath came out slowly.

I walked to the car. Through the slats of a Venetian

blind I saw light in the cabin and movement inside. I opened the car door to take her valise to her. She had beaten me to it; it wasn't there.

Had she gone ahead to make sure I wouldn't as much as touch that valise?

I removed the ignition key and got my Gladstone bag from the car trunk and went into the cabin. Jeanie was standing beside the double bed and unbuttoning her dress.

Chapter Two

FIVE LARGE PEARL buttons ran from the collar to the waist of the yellow piqué dress. She was opening the last of them. I shut the door and stood against it.

"Did you register?" Jeanie asked.

I nodded. Most of her brassiere was visible. It was pink mesh, holding her breasts high and snug. She was completely unabashed, completely casual, as if we were lovers of long standing who took each other's undressing in stride instead of strangers whose only physical contact had been for a brief moment in the car when she had put her hand on my arm.

She pulled the open parts of the dress away from skin that was the color and texture of cream. "It's still damp," she said, but didn't take it off. She turned to the mirror above the pine chest of drawers. Her hands went up under the light-brown hair, fluffed it, let it fall back to her shoulders.

"You going to hold that bag all night, honey?" she said.

I hadn't realized that I was still hanging onto it. Her own valise had been pushed in between the chest of drawers and the wooden armchair. I set my bag down at the foot of the bed, which occupied half the room.

That bed was the essential reason for the room. Her grass-stained linen slippers stood neatly beside it and her nylon stockings were draped over the footboard. No setting could have been more intimate, and there we were. But it wasn't that simple.

"How old are you, Jeanie?"

She turned her head. Her mouth, for all its redness, remained naïve, almost childish, and her slender, partly exposed body was an adolescent's body.

"Twenty." Then she added mockingly, "I'm plenty old enough, if that's what's eating you."

"That's only part of it," I said. "You don't have to pay me for this cabin."

She swung away from the chest of drawers. The way her dress fell away from her scarcely covered breasts made her look particularly wanton. Her eyes blazed, and for the first time I noticed the yellow flecks in them.

"What the hell d'you think I am?" Her voice was shrill with outrage.

"I only said—"

"Listen! I can buy this whole damn cabin if I want to. I bet I got more dough on me than you. Who're you to talk so snooty? A crumby schoolteacher!"

"I merely wanted to make it clear that you owed me nothing," I said stiffly.

"I never owed no man nothing and never will. How d'you like that?"

What was I doing here with a vulgar, semiliterate girl? I said, "I'll ask for separate cabins."

"Don't be such a stuffed shirt, honey." She was looking me over with an amused smile now, and then she laughed. She had a fine laugh, low and musical. "You're a funny guy. Different. I guess that's why I like you. Can't a girl just like a guy?"

I was as willing as she to make peace. "I'm sorry, Jeanie, if I said anything out of line."

"Forget it."

"Put on dry clothes and we'll go out for a bite."

"I don't feel like eating. But you're hungry, so you go. I'll wait here."

"All right."

I was turning the doorknob when she said, "Don't you like me?" and she was coming to me barefooted with the top of her dress open and her slim hips undulating. She put her hands flat on my chest and threw her head back. I kissed her. My lips shifted from her mouth to her throat.

She broke it up then, laughing gaily. "We got all night, honey. I'll wash up while you go eat."

"All right."

"Hurry back." A quick kiss dismissed me. When I reached for her, she squirmed away and pattered into the bathroom.

I crossed the floodlighted area to the lunchroom. Two boys and two girls at the counter filled the place with raucous and vapid chatter. The girls were not much older than my students and about the same age as Jeanie, with whom I was about to go to bed. As I waited for the weary-looking woman to fry up a couple of hamburgers for me, I felt like a middle-aged roué sniffing after young girls.

But I wasn't old. Only thirty-four. And Jeanie, whatever her real age, had in her a harder adult core than any woman I had ever known. So that part was all right, but the rest wasn't. Because there had to be more. There had to be something that was deeply troubling her; something that explained her actions from the moment I had spotted her half hiding in the woods to her refusal to leave the car or the cabin for food; something that likely included preparing for a night together with me.

The hell with it. For once I would stop looking all around whatever it was I wanted; I would stop turning it inside out and examining and debating. For this time at least I would stop being the lonely and increasingly prissy teacher of adolescents. Jeanie, we're going to have fun tonight.

The hamburger sandwiches were dried out and the coffee was anemic, but I ate and drank heartily. I bought a couple of packs of cigarettes and paid up and sauntered out like a man who knew where he was going and was pleased with what was waiting for him.

The fat boy and a uniformed policeman were standing near the rear bumper of my car beside Cabin 3.

"That's the gentleman," the boy said, pointing to me.

My stride broke. I recovered instantly and went on. The cop had the law's usual imposing bulk, running to flesh in all three dimensions.

"This your car?" he demanded.

"Yes."

"Where's your wife?"

"Inside."

"You sure she's your wife?"

"Don't get insulting," I snapped, working at being an indignant citizen.

"Well, I'd like to see her."

"What's this about, Officer?"

"We're looking for a girl wore a yella dress and was carrying a big luggage bag. She got a lift near Darson from a black Chevvy coop with a New York license. We don't know the license number, but the man who saw it says it was a fifty Chevvy coop." His jaw indicated my car. "Fits your coop perfect."

"There must be thousands like it on the road."

"Where you coming from?"

"Kentucky."

"So you could've passed Darson around four this afternoon?"

"I may have, but I wasn't aware it was against the law."

"Don't you be smart with me. Man at a gas station near Darson says the driver told him he was bound for New York, then he saw this girl come out of the woods and get a lift in the Chevvy."

"I can assure you my wife and I gave nobody a lift."

The cop's chin shifted toward the fat boy. "This fella says your wife wore a yella dress. I aim to talk to her."

"I bet your wife has a yellow dress, too," I said.

"I'm checking, that's all."

There was no help for it. Together we went to the cabin door. I knocked.

"Come in," Jeanie called drowsily.

I pushed in the door. She was in bed, but had left the light on. The cop was right behind me.

Abruptly she sat up. The blanket fell down to her hips. She had gone to bed without nightgown or pajamas or anything else on. She gaped at the cop, startled, then threw her arms over her breasts.

"I thought you were alone, dear," she gasped.

The cop mumbled an embarrassed apology as he got out of there in a hurry.

When we were alone, Jeanie dropped her arms to yank the blanket up to her chin. She huddled against the headboard.

"What's he after?" she asked thinly.

The yellow dress wasn't in sight and neither was the valise.

I didn't have to answer her. She would know a lot more about it than I did. She would know why she had been afraid to show herself in public by leaving the car or the cabin to eat. I stepped outside and closed the door.

A short distance off the cop waited for me. He couldn't look me in the eye. The fat boy was again with him.

"I ought to report you, Officer," I said, assuming the offensive.

"Jees, sir, she said come in."

"She said it to me. She was half asleep and didn't realize I wasn't alone. We've been driving since dawn."

"I got orders to check everybody in black Chevvy coops. Tell her to put something on."

"She's tired and too embarrassed to face you. I see no reason why she has to be annoyed further. Check with me. You might have asked me to identify myself before barging in on my wife. I'll have you know we're highly respectable people." I dug out my wallet. "Here, look at these."

He examined my driver's license and my Teachers' Guild card. "Lawrence B. Knight," he read aloud, and asked the fat boy if that was the name I had signed in the register. The boy said it sounded like it, but he couldn't say for sure.

"There's an easy way to make sure," I said, pressing my advantage.

We walked to the lunchroom. The fat boy got out the register, in which I had written "Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence B. Knight." Nothing could have looked more innocent. The cop compared that signature with the ones on my license and union card, but he was simply going through

an expected routine to show that he was on his toes. He had already been sold. A solid citizen, member in good standing of a reputable profession, might very well bed down for a night with a girl he'd picked up a few hours ago, but he wouldn't be so foolish as to use his real name.

I accompanied him out to his car.

"This woman you're looking for," I said. "What did she do?"

"She was mixed up in a shooting this afternoon in Darson."

I watched him get into his car. Then I said, "Did she kill somebody?"

"All I know, sir, there's a three-state alarm out for her. A guy with her got plugged and a Darson cop got wounded. She's wanted real bad." He threw in the gear; having no more use for me, he was impatient to get going. "You tell Mrs. Knight I'm right sorry."

"Yes," I muttered. "I certainly will."

I returned to the cabin.

Chapter Three

She was still in bed. She lay flat on her back under a sheet and a single blanket, and she looked at me over the footboard with a wide-eyed artlessness that came close to making me shudder. I turned the key in the door and dropped into the chair.

"He's gone," I said.

Only her eyes moved, sliding in their sockets to watch me sitting at the side of the bed. "Yeah, I saw him go."

Her yellow dress was under the bed. From where I sat I could see a piece of it crumpled against the wall like a discarded rag, and her valise was under there too.

"You spent a lot of time at the window before and after I came in with the cop," I said. "You must have heard him earlier when the fat boy brought him to look my car over and they were talking outside this open window. You knew that pretty soon he'd come in here. You tore off your clothes and—"

"I was undressed. I was waiting for you in bed."

"How touching. But you didn't hide your yellow dress until you heard him tell me the girl he was after was wearing one. Then you crawled into bed to dramatize the theme that we were husband and wife. To help it along, you planned to shock the cop. You did, all right. The sight of you naked set him back on his heels. After that he was ashamed to face you."

"What did he say when he saw the register?"

"You needn't worry. I signed it Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence B. Knight. Lawrence for Larry—my name. That was the clincher; he's convinced. Why did I do it when I registered with a strange woman? I'm not sure. Perhaps I prefer to go through front doors. Can you understand what I'm talking about?"

Jeanie King, or whatever her real name was, uttered a small sigh of relaxation. "But what did the cop want?"

"You, of course. You've been running from the police since this afternoon and made sure you weren't seen outside of my car. But you made two mistakes. The first was not changing your dress right away. The second was letting the old man at the filling station see you. You were careful enough until you were sure I was going far enough in the right direction, but you had to come out before I drove off, and from the shack he saw you get into my car. Even so, it's not working out badly for you. I'm serving my purpose. I'm supplying you with protective coloration until you reach New York."

"My God, how you jabber away!"

"Does this bore you? I'm telling you nothing new. But where do I stand? Somebody got killed and somebody got wounded. The cop didn't know the details, or more likely he didn't care to give them to me. Did you do any of the actual shooting?"

"Honey, you don't think I had anything to do with it?"

"I'm not thinking," I said. "I stopped thinking when I registered you as my wife. There's no reason why I shouldn't have told the cop the truth, but I didn't and I won't. I'm sentimental. Even gallant. I take seriously the stories I read in my youth—that when a lady in distress asks a man for help, he helps her, even when she's no lady. You're safe enough, as far as I'm concerned."

Languidly she stretched. The blanket molded her body. I tried not to recall the thrust of her breasts when she had sat up in bed a few minutes ago. Her cheek had turned against the pillow, burying one eye and her cute little upturned nose and half her mouth. The visible eye and the visible half of her mouth smiled.

"You're a sweet man, honey. I knew it the minute I got into the car with you."

"A sweet man meaning sucker in your lexicon," I said.

"My what?"

"Never mind. I'm in it and I'll stay in it until we reach New York. Pleasant dreams."

She twisted on her side. The blanket slipped, not much, but enough to show those creamy shoulders and remind me that she was naked under it.

"Come to bed, honey."

"I told you earlier that you don't have to pay me. I can be your protective coloration just as well as by spending the night in this chair."

"I want you."

I rose and took off my jacket and draped it over a wire coat hanger on a wall hook. Her eyes never left me as I removed my necktie and shoes. That was as far as I proposed to go to make myself comfortable. I switched out the light and settled back in the chair.

After a while I could hear the gentle rhythm of her breathing. The police of three states were looking for her, but within a few minutes she had dropped off into the serene sleep of the unconcerned. She was quite a girl. She was the only female I had ever met who frightened me. My head slumped to my shoulder. I had driven close to five hundred miles that day, and even in that chair, even with my mind and emotions in tumult, I dozed off. . . .

Voices outside the cabin roused me. I jerked awake, cramped and stiff, and for a moment didn't know where I was. Then I saw Jeanie standing at the front window with her back to me.

The cabin light remained out, but she had partly opened the blind, and the outside floodlights covered her with a mellow glow. She must have jumped out of bed and gone directly to the window, for she wore nothing. Or almost nothing. Only panties, which she must have had on all along in bed—pink mesh like her brassiere had been, fitting as snugly as her skin.

". . . . here around an hour ago." The voice was close to the cabin and sounded like the fat boy's. "He spoke to the gentleman who owns it."

Jeanie had a gun. I saw it when she shifted her body a little. She held it along her bare right leg and her finger was curled around the trigger.

". . . a black Chevvy coop," a second voice was saying outside. "Like this. Who'd you say checked?"

"The cop they call Willie," the fat boy said. "Why don't you cops get together?"

"Willie Hunt. You say he was satisfied?"

"Well, he spoke to the gentleman and his wife and looked at licenses and things and at the register and then he went away."

"Then I guess I don't have to waste my time."

The voices receded, faded. Jeanie turned from the window and saw me staring at her.

The diffused light covered her as gently as moonlight. Her panties might as well not have been on her and her breasts were saucily uptilted like her nose. The corners of her mouth lifted in a small smile; she was no more abashed by the gun in her hand than by her nakedness. The gun was polished nickel and quite small. It seemed hardly more than a toy, but it could spurt death.

"Is that the gun with which you did the shooting in Darson?" I said.

"I didn't shoot nobody." She pouted. "You don't have to believe me."

"You couldn't have intended to shoot it out with the cop if he came in here and then run for it the way you are. So it was for me, to make sure I wouldn't yell out to the cop if I woke."

She moved then, coming slowly toward me along the foot of the bed into the dimmer part of the room, and her sweet, tight body had the muted tones of a nude photographed through a filter. Her bare feet stepped over my outstretched legs. At the chest of drawers she replaced the little gun in her straw handbag.

"You see, honey, I trust you."

"I'm flattered," I said.

She bent over the chair and kissed me. A breast pressed against my shoulder. It wasn't easy to keep from touching her, to force my mouth to be unresponsive under hers.

She lifted her head. "What's the matter with you?"

"Go back to bed."

"Without you?"

"Look," I said. "I thought I made it clear that you can rely on me without that or without a gun either."

She put her hands on her hips and drew her shoulders back, tantalizingly.

I made myself remain in the chair.

"I can spend the rest of the night outside in my car," I said, "but the fat boy might see me there and get ideas and call the cops."

She said sullenly, "Nuts to you!" and climbed into the bed. She pulled the cover to her chin and turned her back to me, curling up.

I sat with my hands gripping the arms of the chair. I was afraid. For all my moralizing to myself, what I was actually doing was playing it safe. I was already pretty deeply in whatever she had done to make the police hunt her; if I got into bed with her, I would be in over my head. I would be committing myself to see her through all the way.

I was not a man who cared to take any step that would disturb the even and uneventful tenor of his life.

My bones protested against the unyielding chair. Jeanie was using only one blanket; two others were folded at the foot of the bed. When I pulled them off the bed, she turned her torso around to watch what I was doing. I spread one blanket on the floor and stretched out on it and covered myself with the other. Looking up, I saw the pale blob of her face hovering over the side of the bed as she peered down at me.

"Of all the crazy dopes!" she said.

The bedsprings creaked as her face withdrew. Then there was silence. This time I had trouble falling asleep, but eventually I did.

I woke to the morning sounds of the motor court—voices calling, doors slamming, cars departing. The floor was no place for drowsy lingering. I rose, and Jeanie wasn't in bed.

She wasn't in the bathroom, either, because the door

was open and I could see all the way into it. And her shoes weren't beside the bed and her stockings weren't over the footboard. I looked under the bed. Her yellow dress and valise were gone, which made it definite.

Sometime during the night she had dressed and slipped away. She no longer needed me. In fact, with the police searching for her in a 1950 black Chevrolet coupé with New York license plates, my car and I were a danger to her.

I was well rid of her.

All the same, I was saddened by a sense of loss. I couldn't understand it. She could have meant nothing good for me, but there it was.

I showered and shaved and dressed and stepped into the bright, fresh morning. I started toward the lunchroom for breakfast; halfway across the clearing I turned back. The fat boy would find it curious that my wife wasn't eating with me. After the goings on last night, he might be alert enough to take a look in the cabin and, finding her gone, get in touch with the police. I strode to my car.

My keys weren't in the left pocket of my trousers where I always kept them. As I searched for them, I discovered that my wallet was missing from my left hip pocket. So she was a crook. I might have expected that. A girl who would sleep with any man who picked her up. A girl who carried a gun in her handbag and was involved in shootings with the police. A tart and a crook.

A moment later I came across both key case and wallet. They were in one of my jacket pockets. I counted the money—fifty-odd dollars, exactly what there should have been. The money mattered only a little; I was glad chiefly because she hadn't stooped quite so low.

When I unlocked the car trunk to put my Gladstone bag into it, I found her tan valise.

That explained the keys' not having been in the proper pocket, and the wallet too. Without awakening me, she had managed to lift them from my trousers, in which I had been sleeping. She had returned them more conveniently by simply dropping them into my jacket pocket.

It appeared that I still had a purpose to serve. She didn't care to be burdened with luggage as she made her way to New York. It was up to me to transport it for her. The wallet she had needed to learn my home address.

So after all I wasn't yet clear of her. And I wasn't quite sorry.

I stuck my bag beside hers and locked the trunk and drove off.

Eight o'clock. I snapped on the radio for news. A Richmond station came on. War in Korea and the threat of war everywhere else. Then suddenly there was a name in the air.

Jean. Jean for Jeanie.

Not Jean King, as she had told me. Jean Tropp. She had given me, at any rate, a half-truth.

That was my Jeanie, all right. The radio voice said that she had just been identified, though little was known about her except her real name and that she had been living with Bertie Bride when he had been shot and killed yesterday afternoon in Darson. But by now it was stale news, except for the continuing search for Jean Tropp, and there were few details.

Half an hour later I stopped off for breakfast at a lunch wagon in a small northern Virginia town. Next door was a drugstore that sold newspapers. I bought a Richmond and a Washington morning paper and read them at the lunchroom counter. The Washington paper had only a couple of paragraphs, but the Richmond paper gave it a play on page three.

The story went back to last Friday, when four armed, masked men had staged a payroll holdup in Knoxville, Tennessee, and had got away with more than twenty thousand dollars. Yesterday, Monday, the Virginia state police had got a tip that one of the holdup men was a well-known criminal named Bertie Bride, who was holing up with a woman in a boardinghouse in Darson, where they were using the names of Mr. and Mrs. Baxter. Bride was leaving the house when state and local police arrived. He pulled out a gun and began to shoot. He wounded one

cop before he was mowed down. During the gun fight the girl who was known as Mrs. Baxter, and later identified as Jean Tropp, slipped out of the house. The landlady saw her leave, wearing a yellow dress and carrying a large tan valise.

Several hours later Jean Tropp was observed getting a lift in a New York car—and there followed a description of my coupé and a safely vague description of myself.

According to the news story, the police were particularly anxious to get their hands on the girl because her valise might contain part or all of the holdup loot.

"What's yours?" the plump blonde behind the counter asked.

My stomach felt as if it couldn't take anything solid.

"Just orange juice and coffee."

There was a two-column photo of Bertie Bride. I stared at it. A youthful, handsome face with a sleek mustache and startled eyes. He didn't look like a crook and a killer. I supposed that the real ones seldom did.

And what was a gunman's mistress supposed to look like? I knew. Naïve and adolescent, leggy and slim-hipped, with light-brown hair and saucy breasts.

I drank orange juice and coffee and paid and got out, leaving the two newspapers on the counter. I drove until I reached an uninhabited stretch of highway and pulled my car off on the grass and unlocked the trunk door. Her valise had no lock to it. Leaning into the trunk, I opened the valise.

Her yellow dress and stained linen shoes were on top. My hands dug in. Dresses, skirts, blouses, hose, underwear, nightgowns—whatever a girl would need in the way of clothing on a trip. And nothing else.

I closed the valise and locked the trunk door and stood at the side of the highway watching the cars shoot by. After a while I got back into my car and continued to drive north toward home.

Chapter Four

THE square block of house consisted of what were called garden apartments, which meant that the entrance of each of the six units was from a courtyard where a patchy lawn and a few shrubs had been planted. From the fourth-floor apartment that Marjorie and I shared, you looked down at four newly transplanted trees in a freshly paved street, and on a clear day you could see the mast of the Empire State Building and the sparking spire of the Chrysler Building across the East River.

When I returned home that evening, I found my sister Marjorie in her usual position in the wing chair and engaged in her usual activity of watching the television screen across the room. I put down both bags—two because I had also brought Jeanie's up from the car—and kissed Marjorie.

"You said you'd be gone only a few days." She greeted me with an inevitable complaint.

"Only five," I apologized. "They wanted me to stay at least a week."

"Leaving me all alone! I haven't been feeling well. My stomach."

Her lips quivered. But she didn't break into tears. She sniffled, and suddenly I was more disgusted than contrite.

"Don't you ever stop feeling sorry for yourself?" I said.

She looked at me, startled that I would deliberately say something to hurt her. "Why, Larry, what a way to talk to your poor sister!"

"I'm sorry."

And I was sorry. Poor sister, poor Marjorie. It wasn't any fun to be an unattractive, forty-year-old virgin who spent most of her days and evenings watching television as her big frame kept adding fat and her legs swelled

and she nursed real and imagined ailments. My mother used to say—though never, of course, within Marjorie's hearing—that it was a pity her only daughter couldn't have shared some of the good looks of her two younger brothers.

"Why didn't you let me know when you were coming home?" Marjorie was saying. "I've no supper prepared for you and nothing in the house."

"That's all right. I had a big meal on the road a couple of hours ago."

I carried both bags into my room.

I wondered what to do with Jeanie's. With the police all over the East hunting her, she wouldn't be concerned over losing some clothing. Chances were she would never bother to pick the valise up. Well, I couldn't leave it here in my room. Marjorie would be sure to have a look inside when she cleaned up, and I'd have a devil of a time explaining. I should have left it in the car trunk. Later I'd take it down again.

I started to shed my clothes in preparation for a shower. When I was down to my underwear, I paused to look at myself at the mirror. I was a big man. We all ran to size in my family, but while Marjorie had always been heavy and had kept expanding through the years, and while George was beginning to acquire jowls and a potbelly, most of my bulk was in height and shoulders and chest. In an outburst of vanity I thumped my hard belly. Put it down to handball and tennis and clean living.

Maybe too damn much clean living.

The point was, why wouldn't she have wanted me for no other reason than that I was a palatable male animal? Meaning Jeanie. There needn't have been any strings attached. A simple meeting of the sexes, if I hadn't been such a . . .

Cut it out. Wipe her from your mind. Forget the way her breasts tilted; forget the clean sweep of her flanks; forget the briefly experienced taste of her mouth. All that was left of her was her valise, and that you could easily get rid of.

More easily than to get rid of the memory.

I didn't continue undressing. Tired from two days of driving and restless hours on the cabin floor, I flopped down on my bed.

So you side-stepped that, too, I thought, unable to let go of myself. Last night you moved a little way toward adventure, to actually stepping out into the vital, living world, and then you stopped to examine and moralize and let the chance pass. You're safe, you're secure, but what did you get out of it? What you always got—back to this lonely bed in an apartment that was never a home with a nagging, imposing sister.

Sunday night my sister-in-law, Alice, of whom I was very fond, had bawled me out. The children had been put to bed and Alice and George and I had sat in the living room of their neat little house in the small Kentucky city where George had moved a dozen years ago and had set up a moderately successful lumber business. And I had broached the subject that had been the real reason for my visit.

"Look," I had said. "Marjorie has been living with me since Ma died. You've been good about it, George; you send her money for her clothes and extras. But I've done more than my share. You've got room here, and—well . . ."

"No!" Alice had burst out. "She's not going to ruin my home the way she's ruining your life."

George had looked at his cigar and said nothing.

"We don't have to be nasty about Marjorie," I had protested. "She's very devoted to me."

"But you want to get rid of her," Alice had said.

"I merely suggest we ought to take turns boarding her."

"She's never been devoted to anybody but herself," Alice had said. "If she cared a hoot for you, would she be so selfish?"

"That's not fair. Marjorie would do anything for me."

"Like keeping you a bachelor, for instance," Alice had said.

"What?" I had said. "What are you talking about?"

"He doesn't even suspect." She had looked at George and had thrown up her hands in a hopeless gesture. "Larry, how many women have thrown themselves at your feet?"

"Oh, come."

"Don't be modest. You're a big, charming, handsome man. You have a good job."

"Not these days," I had mumbled. "Remember, I'm the lowliest of the low—a schoolteacher."

"What do you earn?"

"Fifty-four hundred."

"That's still money. Good money. And you have more security than anybody I know. I'll introduce you to a dozen lovely girls right in this town who'd be delighted to—"

"Spare me your matchmaking, please."

My sister-in-law had become pugnacious while my brother had remained silent and uneasy, occupied with his cigar.

"You ought to appeal to Marjorie to spare you her unmatchmaking," she had flared up. "Last time I was in New York you introduced me to a fine girl you were going out with. Sally Ewing. You see, I even remember her name. When we left, I told George it was all arranged, there would be a wedding soon. I could see it. But what happened?"

"It didn't work out."

"Why not?"

"Just one of those things."

"Just Marjorie, you mean," Alice had said. "I know what she did. Marjorie spoke to me about Sally Ewing. She found fault with her background—as if the Knights are such hoity-toity people. She didn't approve of her clothes and manners. She tore her down the way only one woman can tear down another. Perhaps you don't know what happened, Larry, but I know. Marjorie drove her away from you and drove you away from her. The way she's done with every woman you ever knew since she lived with you. Don't imagine she's interested in

your welfare. She cares about her home, such as it is—the home you make for her. She knows that no wife of yours would tolerate her sniffling and nagging and complaining for a day."

"What this long speech means, in short, is that you don't want Marjorie here," I had said.

George had spoken for the first time. "Now, Larry, why can't Marjorie get a small apartment of her own somewhere in New York? You and I will each contribute half to her support."

"I can't do that to her," I had said. "I can't drive her out and make her live alone."

"But it's all right for her to make you live alone," Alice had said. "In heaven's name, Larry, use your head. She can get along all right. There's nothing really wrong with her. She can go out and get a job. Other women work for a living. Don't you understand what you're letting her do to you? You're the domestic type. You deserve a decent, normal, healthy life—a wife and children."

"Forget I brought up the subject," I had said stiffly. "Marjorie will stay with me."

"Which is exactly what she wants," Alice had said. "To keep you tied to her."

"Then let her," I had said. "She gets little enough out of life."

"And what do you get out of life?" Alice had said.

I had shrugged. That had been no answer, but it had been the only one I could give.

The phone rang. I sat up on the bed, then slumped back when I heard Marjorie answer it. I could have spent last night in a bed—spent it with considerable pleasure.

Aw, stop it. Does a man have to keep apologizing to himself for having done the sensible and proper thing?

He does, sometimes.

Marjorie knocked on the door. "Can I come in?"

"What is it?"

"That was Katy on the phone. She wants me to come

over to help her with some sewing. Will you drive me?"

"I'll be ready in a minute."

I was back in my clothes in less time than that, after which I had to wait another twenty minutes for Marjorie. She took as much time primping as an attractive woman, but somehow she always did the wrong things to herself. She wore something black and flowing that added to her bulk, and she had got into shoes that made it almost impossible for her to walk on legs already overburdened by what they had to carry.

Waddling, she clung to my arm on the way to the elevator and complained that she was finding it harder and harder to get about.

"You could watch your diet, the way a dozen doctors advised," I said.

"What do doctors know?"

"Nothing, I suppose, because they all insist that the only thing wrong with you is that you eat too damn much."

Her puffy lips quivered. If the elevator hadn't arrived at that moment and if people hadn't been in it, she might well have gone into one of her weeping acts.

She was grimly silent during the mile drive. When I stopped the car, she whined, "Larry, what's come over you? You've snapped at me ever since you came back. Did anything happen at George's?"

"No."

"Then why are you like this?"

"Let me alone." I got out and opened the door for her and helped her out of the car and up the porch steps.

"I'll phone you when I'm ready to leave," she said.

"All right." I started off the porch.

"Larry, you haven't said good-by to me."

I returned to her and kissed her.

When I entered my apartment several minutes later, I found I had a visitor. Jeanie was coming out of my room carrying her tan valise.

Chapter Five

AT THAT moment she could have passed as one of the quieter seventeen-year-old girls in my senior classes. Her face had a wholesome, scrubbed look achieved by the simple method of leaving off all make-up except a subdued pale red on the small mouth; and a cotton blouse and striped shirt and bobby socks and low-heeled shoes completed the teen-age effect. She couldn't have found a better disguise from the police who were hunting a gangster's girl friend.

"I got the address out of your wallet last night," Jeanie said brightly. "The door was unlocked, so I came right in."

"I see you found your valise."

"That's what I came for." She set the valise down. "Who's the fat dame who's living with you? Your mother?"

"My sister. Did you see us leave?"

"No, but I had a look in her closet while I was waiting for you. Her dresses could be used for tents."

"Why were you waiting?" I said. "You've reached New York and now you have your valise. What further use can I be?"

"I can't dope you out, honey. You stick your neck out to help me, but you keep acting like you don't like me at all."

I wished that she would take her valise and get out of my life, and I wished that she wouldn't. I stood facing her in my living room and said nothing because I didn't have any clear thoughts to put into words.

She shrugged. "O.K., I'll be on my way. But I been traveling all day and I'll be doing lots more. I'd like to get cleaned up. Can I take a shower?"

"You'll find the bathroom down the hall." I tried to sound casual, indifferent, but I didn't feel that way. Every act of hers had something of intimacy in it. As now. Standing beside her valise, she started to unbutton her blouse.

This was like last night all over again. But not quite like it, either, because this time I knew who and what she was.

"You can get undressed in the bathroom," I said harshly.

She laughed derisively. "I won't embarrass the great big shy schoolteacher." And with an impudent shake of her hips she left the room.

I lit a cigarette and sat down on the sofa. I heard water running. I remembered that the entrance door was unlocked and went to lock it. I returned to the living room and stubbed out the cigarette and lit another.

A gangster's girl, I thought. His mistress until yesterday, when he had been killed by the police. So what? She was not, never, at any time my kind of girl, but so what for an hour or two?

In the bathroom the water stopped running.

"Honey," she sang out, "I have no towel."

The people in the adjoining apartments could hear through the walls every raised voice. Marjorie didn't call me honey and they would certainly recognize that that lilting young voice wasn't hers. I wondered if anybody had seen Jeanie come in here.

The hell with them!

The bathroom door was open a crack. Through it I said, "There are towels on the bar."

"Hand towels. Haven't you got a big one?"

I fetched a bath towel from the hall linen closet. The bathroom door opened several more inches and a bare arm appeared.

"Hand it to me," she said.

For a long moment I did nothing. Then I said, "I'm coming in to dry you."

Her arm withdrew. I pushed the door in, and there

she stood on the bath mat. Her creamy skin glistened wetly. She faced me with eyes curiously tight at the corners, and she waited.

I spread out the towel and dried her. I dried her from neck to feet, not touching her except through the towel, and she didn't stir. I could sense her all wound up inside the way I was.

I dropped the towel and rose to my feet and placed my hands on her hips. Yellow flecks swam in eyes which were wide with intensity. Her face seemed to have thinned, tightened, the skin stretched taut over the cheekbones. I was not aware of either of us moving, but suddenly we were together, her mouth under mine.

"My God, how you torture a girl!" she whispered.

I swung partly away from her, and with my arms about her snug waist I moved with her out of the bathroom and down the hall to my room. I yanked off the bedspread and pulled down the blanket, but she waited, standing, for me to undress, and then she seized me and our hands groped, sought, found each other.

And afterward I felt fine. Night had fallen and the darkness was snug and warm and intimate as she lay against me with her head on my shoulder. Her hair tickled my nose. I turned my face away and her hand came affectionately up to my cheek, and I kissed her tenderly and sank back into the delightful lethargy we shared now as our bodies had shared passion.

I must have dozed off, because her voice startled me before I recalled that I wasn't alone in my bed.

"You know what, honey?" she was saying. "I was beginning to think there was something wrong with you. Sick or something."

"That wasn't what kept me from you last night."

"Well, I sure found out it wasn't." Her soft hand moved over me. "My, you're strong. Some chest."

"I can go into raptures over yours."

"You say the nicest things when you want to. You're the man for me, honey."

I said, "Was Bertie Bride the man for you too?"

She lay very still against me. "Why should we talk about him?"

"All right, let's not."

"I didn't like Bertie much."

"Do you generally sleep with men you don't like much?"

"Don't be like that. I liked him all right for a while, then I didn't. He was mean to me."

"But you continued to live with him?"

"Well, not so much in the end. It was only . . ."

Her mouth turned against my shoulder. I didn't ask her what she had been about to say. I didn't want to know about Bertie Bride or about a holdup in Knoxville or a shooting in Darson or anything else about her. She was a girl to make love to rather than to love, to hold for another few minutes in the drowsy aftermath of fulfillment before she left. And I would never see her again, and that would be all right.

The phone rang.

Jeanie's leg was flung across my body. It held me pinned down as I started to move. "Don't answer."

The radium dial of my alarm clock said a quarter after ten. Normally too early for Marjorie to call. The ringing ceased, then started again, urgently. "I might as well," I muttered, untangling myself. I put on the bedside lamp and got my robe from the closet and padded out.

Marjorie's voice said, "Larry, pick me up."

"This early?"

"I'm finished. I'd like to get home."

"Can't you hang around till eleven?"

"What are you doing?"

"Something!" I snapped.

"Larry, what's come over you tonight?"

"All right, I'll be there in half an hour."

"You must make it sooner. Katy wants to go to bed."

"I'll try," I said, and hung up.

Jeanie had blandly kicked the cover down to the foot of the bed. In the glow of the bedside lamp, she lay outstretched with the indolence of a kitten in front of a fire.

She pouted when I told her she would have to leave right away.

"What's the rush, honey?"

"I have to pick up my sister."

Yawning, she looked down the length of her body and wiggled her painted toes. "Honey, why don't you come with me? I'm going to New Hampshire. Drive me there tonight."

"More protective coloration?" I said wryly.

"You make me tired. I got friends here in New York who'd be glad to drive me, or I can take a train. But I want you."

"Tonight?"

"We can start out tonight. Say we drive a few hours and sleep somewhere and get there tomorrow. And you can stay as long as you want to."

I sat down on the edge of the bed. "Where in New Hampshire?"

"A place called Stoker Hill nobody ever heard of. A fella named Hank has a fine place near there in the mountains."

"Another boy friend of yours?"

"What d'you take me for? I got only one, and you're it. Anyway, Hank's an old geezer. Being you're a teacher, you don't work in the summer, do you?"

"Most take summer jobs if they want to make a decent living, but I'm innately lazy."

"So we can spend the whole summer there. You and me together, honey. What's to stop you?"

Nothing and everything.

I said, "What is it, a hideout?"

"Well, I'll be safe there."

"A gangster's hideout?" I persisted.

"There'll be nice people. Honest, you'll like 'em. We'll have a swell time, honey."

Her evasion of my question was an answer. And it was odd that I should be tempted, that I should even consider the notion.

"It's impossible," I said.

"Why is it?"

"I don't belong in a gangster's hideout. I don't belong with you, either. I'm a stuffed shirt, a funny guy. You said so yourself."

"You don't have to get sore." Her hand was on my thigh. "Lay down here."

Her uncovered loveliness was like a pain in my throat. "For just a minute," I murmured.

A great deal more than a minute passed.

I jumped out of bed. It was a wonder Marjorie hadn't phoned again about being kept waiting.

"Let's get a move on," I said, leaning over to slap her playfully where it resounded most.

Jeanie turned flat on her back to protect herself. "You'll come with me, honey?"

"Don't be silly."

"What's so silly about—"

"I haven't time to argue," I said irritably. "Get dressed."

"You had plenty of time for other things with me."

I said, "I'll bring your clothes from the bathroom."

"I don't want you to do a single damn thing for me," she said crossly. Her legs swung off the bed. "You don't catch me chasing after no guy, much less a crumby schoolteacher."

I was fascinated by her indignant wiggle as she stalked out of the room.

A few minutes later I was pulling on my pants when I heard a key turn in the entrance door. I remained bent over, listening to the door open and close and then to Marjorie wheeze in the hall.

"Larry, are you home?"

"Yes."

It could have been a lot worse; she could have arrived when we had been in bed. As I buckled the belt, I heard her heavy tread move into the living room. I would introduce Jeanie as a girl who had dropped in to visit me; and after Jeanie had left I could imagine Marjorie saying, "That mere child, and so uneducated. I'm surprised at

you." And I would grin rather sheepishly and say that she didn't mean anything to me, which would be more or less true.

"Larry!" Marjorie's voice was shrill with a kind of horror. "What does this mean?" she demanded on a lower key.

"You Larry's sister?" I heard Jeanie ask placidly.

"I am. And who may you be?"

"Take it easy, lady," Jeanie said, "or you'll bust a blood vessel."

"How dare you! And in my house practically naked!"

By that time I had reached them.

Before she had finished dressing, Jeanie had gone from the bathroom to the living room, probably to hunt for a cigarette, which she had found and was now lighting. Standing there in scant brassiere and panties, only one stocking on and that crumpled below the knee, the cigarette slanting from a corner of her mouth, she looked piquantly wanton, like a girl in one of the milder French photos. And she was completely unabashed.

"Look, Marjorie," I said.

My sister stared at me with stricken eyes. "You—you have the nerve to bring a—a creature like that into my home!"

"Say, don't you go calling me names," Jeanie said.

"Get her out of here!" Marjorie screamed at me.

And the hysterics came. I watched her flesh shake, but I was too angry to be contrite, as I always had been before at her tears. She took her plump hands from her face and saw me silent and bitter, and she turned ponderously and hurried out of the room. She came closer to running than I had ever before seen her. Her bedroom door slammed.

Jeanie said, "What's eating her? She's only your sister. My God, you'd think she was your wife or something."

Sick anger churned in my stomach, flowed up and through me.

I started out of the room and stopped. "Don't leave yet, Jeanie." I moved on to Marjorie's room.

My sister sat in her rocking chair beside the window. Her huge shoulders heaved. When I closed the door behind me, she removed the handkerchief from her face.

"That's why you refused to call for me," she wailed. "I waited and waited and Katy wanted to go to bed and drove me home. And I found you with a naked tart in my home."

"My home too," I said, "though it's never been much of one. And it was in my bed that we made love."

"Do you have to talk as well as act obscene?"

"I'm a big boy now, Marjorie. I'm entitled to at least a bit of life. You don't give a hang who or what the girl is. You don't give a hang for my happiness either. You care only for this apartment and me in it to keep it up. You're afraid of any woman who can tempt me to set up housekeeping with her instead."

"Larry, please don't be cruel to me."

I clung to the doorknob. It wasn't so much Marjorie, I thought. Alice hadn't been quite right. It was mostly myself. Lawrence B. Knight, the somewhat prissy bachelor, rooted in dullness.

All at once I knew what I had to do. I must tear myself out by the roots violently.

"I'm going away with her," I said.

She gawked at me. "With that young tart!"

"Is everybody who cares for me a tart? All right, probably she is one. I don't know her very well yet. I'm going to tell you something else about her. She's a gangster's moll."

"A what?"

"You see them every day in your television plays. A girl friend of gangsters. Only she's the real thing."

"Larry, you're joking."

"All right, I'm joking," I said tiredly. "But I'm going off with her."

"For—for good?"

Now there was nothing left in her but the terror of loneliness. And I was able again to feel pity for her.

"I'll be back, I suppose, before the summer is over. Per-

haps much sooner. I'll leave a check for you. You'll get along. If you need anything, get in touch with George. He's your brother too."

I stepped out to the hall.

"Larry, wait!"

I closed the door.

In the living room I found Jeanie fully dressed. I told her that I would be with her as soon as I repacked my bag.

Chapter Six

AT MIDNIGHT we left Merritt Parkway west of Bridgeport to search for a bed. We found one in the converted attic of a private tourist house. For the second night in a row I signed a register "Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence B. Knight"—this time without hesitation.

Wearily we flopped into the big poster bed and fell asleep after only a few good-night kisses. But in the morning we lingered long, like a honeymooning couple, in delightful dalliance.

"Honey, honey, honey," Jeanie whispered. "My own wonderful lover boy. God, how I love you!"

There was a silence then, a void I was expected to fill with words similar to hers. I said lamely, "You're very beautiful." Which was true, but still an evasion, and she knew it.

"But you don't love me," she said sullenly.

"I do."

"Then say it."

"I love you."

And that was not quite a lie at that moment, when she was ardent and demanding in my arms.

Presently we dressed and resumed our journey.

Our destination was Stoker Hill in central New Hampshire. Jeanie knew the way. She told me she had spent a week there in June.

"With Bertie Bride?" I asked.

"Sure." She gave me a sidelong glance. "You're not jealous of Bertie?" The idea seemed to please her.

"Jealous of a dead man?" I said.

"I know men. They always want to be the first one."

I shrugged. "Will you have trouble explaining a new boy friend to the people who knew him?"

"They ain't so particular. Anyway, it's none of their business."

"But will they accept me? I mean I'm not—well, I assume I'm not their kind."

She didn't answer at once. It was early evening; we were passing through Concord and were less than an hour from Stoker Hill according to the map. "Turn right next corner," she said. She lit a cigarette and smoked it down in silence.

When we were again on the open road, I said, "So it does bother you?"

"I been thinking all day, honey. Stan won't let you stay if he knows who you are."

"Who's Stan?"

"He's staying at Hank's with his wife, and there are some fellas too. Stan's their boss."

"Are these the men who were involved in the Knoxville holdup with Bertie Bride?"

"Well . . ."

"And they won't trust an honest and upright citizen, is that it?"

Jeanie shifted closer to me and hugged my right arm. "Honey, the cops are looking for me and Hank's is a safe place and real nice and I want you there with me."

"But it doesn't appear that they will tolerate me."

"You ever hear of Prof Glow?" she said.

"No."

"He's a big shot on the West Coast. I know for a fact Stan and the other fellas never saw him. We were talking about Prof Glow one night the time we were all in Hank's place in June. Bertie used to work for Prof Glow and I met him last winter when Bertie took me out to California. Anyway, like I said, Bertie and me were the only ones knew him, and Bertie's dead. You look a lot like Prof."

I drew in my breath. "No doubt this Prof Glow is in the rackets."

"A real big shot. Gambling, but mostly girls. If they think you're him, they'll be real pleased to have you stay."

"By girls, I suppose you mean prostitution?"

"Prof's got half the houses on the West Coast lined up," she said in a tone of respect for a successful captain of industry.

"Fine," I said. "They'll have no trouble taking me for the type."

"I'm not kidding, honey."

"Neither am I. But if he's famous, there might be pictures of him around."

"I'm not saying you can pass for him with anybody who's seen him. You're bigger and handsomer and younger. But like I told you, they don't know what he looks like. And you don't have to worry about pictures. He's not famous like a movie star. He's a quiet guy; keeps out of the limelight. I never once seen his picture anyplace. You can get away with it easy."

I didn't ask what would happen to me if I didn't get away with it.

I said, "What do I do to act like him—talk out of the side of my mouth?"

"Prof Glow is even better educated than you, I bet. That's how he got his name. Prof is short for Professor. Maybe he was once a teacher like you. Nobody knows much about him. I been thinking and thinking how to pass you off at Hank's. I almost made up my mind we'd say you were a con man. Then all of a sudden it hit me how much you're like Prof Glow. You don't have to act at all. Just talk and act natural and you'll be like him."

"I'm disappointed. Here I was hoping to cash in on my knowledge of criminal literature and play tough guy."

"He's tough, all right. He speaks nice and educated and has good manners, but inside he's tough as they come."

"They'll ask questions about my enterprises and cronies."

"Prof Glow just isn't a talkative guy. Me and Bertie spent a whole evening with him last winter. He sat smiling and listening and saying yes and no, but not a word about himself. That's how he is."

"No name but Prof?"

"Oh, yes, I should've told you right off. It's Chester. Chester Glow. But Prof's the only thing I ever heard anybody call him. People wouldn't know who you meant if you said Chester Glow."

"Has he a family?"

"None I ever heard of. Never got married."

"No girl friend or friends?"

"Sure. Me, beginning right now." She took my hand off the wheel and held it against her breast. "I'm Prof Glow's girl and you're Prof Glow. O.K., honey?"

"O.K.," I replied gaily.

Chapter Seven

Stoker Hill consisted mainly of a service station that also sold groceries. As we rolled by, Jeanie said, "There's Fatso. He's one of the fellas staying at Hank's."

I glanced back at a brilliant plaid shirt coming out of the store. "Should we pick him up?"

"He'd have a car—Stan's Kaiser or Hank's jeep. It's a far walk and Fatso don't like to walk. Look for a dirt road on your left."

Alone I would have missed it completely, and Jeanie almost did. She yelled late, and by the time I stopped the car we were fifty feet past. I backed up. Trees and shrubs obscured the entrance. There was no marker of any kind.

"Is this Hank's private road?" I asked.

"I guess not, but nobody else lives on it. He's at the end, about three miles."

The road wound and climbed and dipped. If you drove all the way in second gear, you could manage to keep your teeth from being rattled loose. On the left was a steep wooded slope and on the right a deep ditch; between there was hardly room for one car. What worried me was what would happen if another car came from the opposite direction.

Suddenly, halfway around a particularly nasty curve, there was a car facing us.

Luckily it wasn't in motion. I honked my horn. Nobody was in the car; the woods around remained unresponsive.

"What a place to park," I grumbled.

"That looks like Stan's Kaiser," she said. "Better see if something's wrong."

I got out to investigate. The left front wheel was over on its side in the very deep ditch. Evidently the driver had

come too fast around the curve and the wheel had hit the ditch with an impact that had knocked it askew on its axle. I explained to Jeanie that there would be no way to get through until the Kaiser was hauled out of the way.

"Fatso must be in Stoker Hill to get a towing car," she said.

"Then we'll have to wait."

"You don't know the service around here. Nobody's in a hurry. It might take hours, and it'll be dark very soon."

"Let's walk."

"There's no sense both of us walking," she said. "It's a good couple of miles and I'm dead. I'll wait here in the car. You come back with Hank in his jeep and pick me up. You can't miss it. Walk till you get there."

"All right."

"Honey, you haven't kissed me in hours."

This was like Marjorie reminding me when I forgot to kiss her hello or good-by. But with the kiss itself the similarity ended. I kissed Jeanie and started out.

It was considerably more comfortable walking on that shaded road in the warm early evening than driving over it. Alone now for the first time since last night, away for a little while from the propinquity of her lovely body, I could be astonished at being here. I had no desire to get out of it. A man had a right for once in his life to be a damn fool.

The woods ended in a meadow rolling gently away from the low knoll on which I stood. Distantly the wavy crests of mountains were fringed with purple by the setting sun. The house was on my left, square and gray and close to the ground. Beside it stood a jeep.

At one of the uncurtained downstairs windows I glimpsed movement. Somebody was watching me. I was about to call out when I heard a rhythmic creaking sound. I went on.

A woman was pumping water from a well in front of the house. I stopped some hundred feet away and watched her.

Her hair, piled on top of her head as if to get it out

of the way, was like corn silk glinting in the slanting rays of the disappearing sun. Much of her body was exposed —a strong, tanned, richly smooth body. The legs of her shorts were rolled up as high as possible, baring her fine thighs practically to the hipbones. The only other thing she wore was a strip of flowered cloth knotted at the back, a scant halter that by no means covered all of her conspicuously full breasts as she stood bent over the pump handle.

"I'm not going to tell him, Ronnie," the woman was saying, "but don't ever try anything like that again."

She was speaking to somebody near her but out of my range of vision. I moved a few feet and all of the front of the house came into view. A young man sat tilted back in a canvas chair. He was naked to the waist.

"What's the matter with a little fun, Elsa?" he said.

She turned her back to him and resumed pumping water into a galvanized pail. His eyes absorbed her.

I started toward them. I had taken only a step when a voice behind me said, "You after somethin', mister?"

A man carrying a rifle approached me from the rear of the house.

The week-old stubble on his pinched face was gray, and ragged gray hair protruded past a soiled, frayed Panama hat. At the open collar of a faded blue shirt more tufts of gray curled. He peered at me through thick, black-rimmed lenses.

"Are you Hank?" I asked.

"Yuh. This is my property and you're snoopin'."

"I came with Jeanie Tropp. We couldn't get through the road. She's waiting a couple of miles back in the car for you to pick her up."

The two in front of the house were looking at us. The woman named Elsa had straightened up at the pump and the man named Ronnie had risen from the chair.

"He claims he came with Jeanie," Hank called to them. "Says his car's stuck."

"Keep him covered and bring him over," Ronnie said.

I preceded Hank and his rifle. Now I could see the

woman's face clearly. It was strong-looking, like her body, the features prominent but finely molded. Her violet eyes lay flatly on me.

"Start talking," Ronnie ordered.

"A Kaiser sedan went into a ditch and broke a wheel and we couldn't get past it," I explained. "Jeanie says it's Stan's car."

The woman said, "Well, Stan and Fatso left right after supper. And Stan drives like a madman. Where are they?"

"Evidently they walked to Stoker Hill for a towing car. We glimpsed Fatso in the service station when we passed through."

"You know Stan and Fatso?" Ronnie demanded.

"No. Jeanie pointed Fatso out to me."

"Who the hell are you?"

I had a name to give them, but I preferred to hold off until Jeanie was present. They might ask questions that would require covering up, and she was the lass to do it.

"A friend of Jeanie's," I told him.

Bleakly Ronnie studied me. He was young, in his early twenties, slim and flat-bellied, with a shock of disordered mouse-colored hair. His face had two strikes against it—bulging eyes and not enough chin.

"And that crazy little dopé brought you here?" he said.

"Why not?" I said. "I know the score, if that's what's worrying you."

"Maybe you know too much." Ronnie looked past me. "What's your idea, Hank?"

"Well, now." Casually but steadily Hank's rifle continued to cover me. "We ain't seen him with Jeanie. We don't know he's with Jeanie. He didn't come right up to the house. I caught 'im snoopin' and he don't give his name."

Ronnie nodded. "Last we heard, the cops were looking all over for Jeanie after they burned Bertie down. Could be they caught up with her and she talked her fool head off."

"Me a copper!" I uttered a laugh of sorts. "That's downright funny."

It was, as a matter of fact, as funny as that Lawrence B. Knight could be Prof Glow.

"Funny things happen." Ronnie stepped to me and ran his hands over my clothes. "He's clean." But his hands didn't leave me when they found no gun. He fingered my wallet through my buttoned hip pocket. "Let's have a look at that."

Our first blunder, mine and Jeanie's both. We had overlooked my identifications in my wallet.

I said harshly, "Get your filthy hands off me," and drove my shoulder against Ronnie's bare chest.

He staggered backward and almost lost his balance.

"Hank, take it easy," the woman said sharply. "We don't want shooting."

I turned my head. The rifle had tilted up in the crook of Hank's arm. But his pinched face didn't look menacing. Merely cautious. As for Ronnie, he stood rubbing his chest where my shoulder had struck, and for the moment at least contented himself with glowering.

"Look," I said. "I'm not a small-timer to let any punk maul me or any old geezer with a rifle scare me. It's true you haven't seen me with Jeanie, but that's easily fixed. I walked here to ask Hank to drive back with me in his jeep to pick her up. Let's do it first, and then you can throw your weight around if you still care to."

"That makes sense," the woman said. "Besides, Stan isn't here."

Evidently that was the important thing: Stan wasn't there. The way she said it left no doubt who was the boss.

"He don't get tough with me," Ronnie growled to make clear his own toughness. "You go see if Jeanie's there, Hank, but this character stays here. Leave your gun."

Hank handed his rifle to Ronnie and shambled to the jeep. Keeping me covered, Ronnie backed to the canvas chair and eased down into it.

I took out cigarettes and extended the pack to the woman. She said, "No, thanks," and bent to pick up the pail.

"Let me," I said, and reached down for it.

She didn't release the pail handle. Each of us gripped it. Bent over like that, we faced each other. My eyes shifted down from her corn-silk hair, drawn by her rather splendid breasts half spilling out of the halter in that position. She straightened up with the pail, saying briskly, "I can manage," and my hand slipped away from the handle.

Ronnie was leaning forward in the chair, at that moment more intent on the woman than on keeping me covered with the rifle. His gaze followed her stunningly feminine figure as she carried the pail into the house, and there was blatant hunger in his eyes.

I lit a cigarette and for the first time I had a chance to look around. That gray, shingled, weather-beaten house went far back into the last century. It hugged the ground as if it were part of it, and from whatever angle you saw it, it would look two-dimensional, like the paintings of farmhouses in American primitives. White paint elaborated the window frames by arching them in the shape of pagodas.

On the right there was a breezeway connecting the house with the barn. During the rugged down-East winters you used to huddle with your livestock under the same roof, as it were. Now, of course, there was no livestock, because obviously for a long time this hadn't been a farm of any kind. Nothing was planted in the meadows sweeping toward the mountains, and the ruin into which the barn had been allowed to crumple was no place for domestic animals.

Another kind of animal was now inhabiting the farm —gangsters from cities. And here I was among them, and my task was to persuade them that I was one of them.

Chapter Eight

THE WOMAN came out of the house. She said to Ronnie, "I put up water to heat for the dishes."

"It's Fatso's turn. I washed the lunch dishes."

"Fatso helped me get dinner."

"Hell, why don't Stan do anything?"

"I do more than my share and Stan's share too."

Grunting, Ronnie returned part of his attention to me. The woman stood quiet and relaxed beside the door and looked out at the mountains that were fading with the coming of night.

"Are you Stan's wife?" I asked her.

She adjusted the halter a trifle higher over her breasts —an automatic, abstracted gesture intended more for comfort than for modesty. "Yes," she said. "Mrs. Crocker."

Stan's full name, then, was Stan Crocker. That rang no bell, any more than had the names of Bertie Bride and Prof Glow. I wasn't up on the criminal Who's Who, but give me time.

The jeep appeared from among the trees. Jeanie rode beside Hank. "Hi," she sang out brightly to all of us. Ronnie stood up, the rifle dipping. I strode over to where the jeep was rolling to a stop.

"Why didn't you tell me who you was?" Hank said as he climbed out. "Glad to know you, Prof."

He extended a leathery hand. After I had shaken it, he hurried over to the two who were now standing by the pump.

"The bags are in the back seat," Jeanie said.

As I pulled them out, I whispered, "They're suspicious."

"What do you expect if you just come barging in and refuse to give a name? Hank said Ronnie got mean.

Don't let Ronnie throw you. He's naturally mean. You nervous, honey?"

"A little."

"There's nothing to worry about. Hank helped me back your car off the road on some grass so a towing car can get to Stan's car. Here's the keys."

I dropped the keys into my pocket and picked up the bags and Jeanie and I strolled over to join the others.

"Prof Glow hisself," Hank was telling them enthusiastically. "You know, from out West. That Prof Glow. Ain't no bigger shot out that way." He turned his head. "Ain't that who he is, Jeanie?"

"Of course," Jeanie said. "But don't blow it around. He's laying low."

"Ain't a better place," Hank said.

Ronnie shifted his feet uneasily. His finger was off the rifle trigger. "Jees, Prof, why didn't you say so? You can't blame a guy for being careful."

"I don't have to explain myself to every wise punk."

"Well, we gotta be careful here," Ronnie insisted.

If Prof Glow was a lad whose mere presence struck terror into the hearts of minor gangsters, I had to act the part. "But you don't have to be dumb," I said crisply. "And get rid of that gun."

The way he meekly obeyed gave me my first experience with the heady sensation of power. He leaned the rifle against the house.

Elsa Crocker spoke in that quiet tone of hers. "Have you got it, Jeanie?"

"Sure thing," Jeanie said. "How're you doing, Elsa? Slaving away again for these heels?"

They stood together, the ripe-bodied woman and the slender girl—Jeanie taller, prettier, and, by contrast with the other, now more than ever looking like an unworldly child.

"I don't mind cooking, and the boys help," Elsa said. "Is he staying?"

The question referred to me, but she asked it of Jeanie, as if I were incapable of answering.

I spoke up for myself. "Any objection?"

"I'm not sure how Stan will feel about it," she said exclusively to Jeanie.

"Who the hell's Stan?" Jeanie said. "Prof's got a slew of guys on his payroll ten times bigger than Stan. Anyway, Prof knows all about the Knoxville caper. He was wise already when I met him in New York last night."

"It didn't require great deduction." I was determined to say my own piece. "The papers carried the story Saturday, the day after the caper, and then yesterday I read that Bertie was burned down in Darson and that the girl who was with him had been identified as Jeanie Tropp. You don't expect me to yell copper, do you?"

Hank chuckled. "That's funny, Prof Glow yellin' copper. Only thing is, Prof, I ain't got no more rooms empty unless you double up with Ronnie or Fatso."

"Who's using the room I had last month?" Jeanie asked.

"Had it waitin' for you and Bertie," Hank said. "Your clothes are still in it. But that's the last empty room, and Prof here will have to double up with—"

Jeanie cut in, "He'll double up with me," and smiled her naïve, small-mouthed smile and fluffed her light-brown hair.

Hank looked pleased; that solved the problem of enough rooms to go around. A shadow crossed Ronnie's face; possibly he had nurtured a hope of replacing the dead Bertie Bride in bed. And Elsa Crocker had a comment.

"You don't waste time, do you, Jeanie?" she said quietly.

"Is it your business?" Jeanie retorted.

"I suppose not."

"Then shut up," Jeanie said without sounding particularly disagreeable. She hugged my arm. "Let's go up and change our clothes, honey."

We went into the house.

Hank was right behind us. In the big center hall he said, "They pay in advance, Prof. No tellin' when one

of you'll light out. A hundred bucks a week." He held out his hand palm up. "That'll be two hundred bucks for both."

"That's a lot more than last time," Jeanie protested.

"Last time there wasn't no heat on you folks. I'm takin' a big chance."

"What a racket!" Jeanie said. "No electricity and no running water and we got to do the cooking ourselves."

"I clean the house and pay for the food. Steak we had tonight. Meat twice today, and how them guys eat!"

The haggling was pointless. My wallet contained some thirty-five dollars, but I couldn't say so. Prof Glow wouldn't go anywhere without a fat bank roll. I looked at Jeanie.

She understood. "Honey, didn't you put your big bills in the bag?"

"Yes."

"You can wait till we unpack, Hank. You don't think Prof will do you out of a lousy two C's?"

"I get the dough tonight," Hank stated flatly. "A week in advance. O.K., Prof?"

"O.K.," I said, because there wasn't anything else I could say in his presence.

Hank drifted off. He wasn't required to show us up to our room; Jeanie knew where it was. I tagged after her up the stairs.

It was a nice enough room, a large corner room with cross ventilation and a fine view of the mountains through uncurtained windows. The dark-wood bed had an immense, ornately carved headboard and was covered by the usual patchwork quilt. A corner washstand held a chipped porcelain basin, and under it stood a galvanized pail. The outhouse was a short distance behind the house. Two hundred dollars a week. Criminals were easily exploited.

I wiped my face with my pocket handkerchief. It seemed to me that for the last half hour I had been holding my breath.

Jeanie kicked off her shoes. "You didn't do so bad,

honey, but don't push it. Prof Glow is a very refined guy. You talked too hard-boiled for him."

"That's what I get for watching gangsters in the movies."

"Prof is no mug. He's real class. Mingles in society. Just act yourself."

"If I acted myself," I said, "I would never have come here in the first place. And I don't see how I can stay. I've only enough money for both of us for one day. I can't cash a check here and I can't wire my brother for money because I can't use my real name."

She was pulling her dress over her head. She spoke through it. "I'm loaded, honey. I got plenty for both of us."

"No."

She flung the dress on the bed. "My God, are we going to have another argument?" She pressed herself against me. "If it'll make you feel better, let's call it a loan. You can pay me back when you can cash a check. Where's that kiss, honey?"

I held her against me.

"Um, good," she said. "Ain't you glad we're here?"

"Yes."

"Light the lamp, honey."

Twilight was closing in fast. I released her.

As I removed the globe from the kerosene lamp, I said, "Is the holdup money in your valise?"

She was pulling out a drawer of the ponderous mahogany dresser, which could have been as old as the house. "Yeah. Half of it."

"Why only half?"

"Bertie and Stan split it right afterward so if one was caught it wouldn't be all lost."

"That would make it about ten thousand dollars, according to the papers."

"I guess so. I didn't count it."

"I assume the bag has a false bottom.

"So you looked inside?"

"Not thoroughly," I said. "I'm not very experienced at

such things, though my education is progressing. You took a big chance leaving it in my car."

"It wouldn't have been a big chance lugging it around with me." Hands on hips, she appraised her body approvingly in the mirror. "Maybe the real reason was I wanted an excuse to see you again."

"That could've been a highly expensive excuse."

"Could be I figured you were worth it. What would you've done if you'd found the dough?"

"Probably turned it over to the police. But I don't know. I'm no longer sure of anything about myself, except that I know I wouldn't have transported the loot for you."

"Larry!" That was one of the few times she called me by name. I had the wick trimmed and the lamp lit; I replaced the globe and saw that her eyes were anxious. "You're not getting ideas?" she said.

"Isn't it too late for ideas? In effect, I've become an accessory to the holdup."

"You sure have. If you stepped out of line, the cops would jump on you anyway, and if they let you go, the boys would kill you." Her features relaxed. "But you never would, would you, honey?"

"No. I remain a funny guy."

She carried her valise over to the dresser. I removed my jacket and went to hang it up in the closet. Besides several dresses, the closet held a man's blue serge suit and a pair of linen slacks. Bertie Bride's, no doubt. Because of a policeman's bullet, he was not now here in this room with Jeanie, who in fragile underthings was placidly getting settled by transferring clothes from the valise to the dresser.

I couldn't bring myself to hang up my jacket beside the dead man's clothes. I draped it over the back of a chair and sat down and watched the charming curve of her flanks as she crouched in front of a lower drawer.

Her valise was almost empty, but only of its unimportant contents. What was really valuable was out of sight beneath the false bottom.

I said, "I suppose the reason you all gathered up here in June was to plan the Knoxville holdup."

"They talked about it."

"Who was the leader—Bertie Bride or Stan Crocker?"

"You could say both. It was Bertie's idea. He cased the plant. Stan had the men. Ronnie and Fatso are Stan's boys."

"How did you participate?"

"Participate?" Jeanie frowned, then laughed. "Say, you don't think I was in on the job?"

"You merely waited for Bertie in Darson, was that it?"

"Well, Bertie was a careful planner. Everything doped out in advance. We took a room in a Darson boarding-house. Darson was far enough from Knoxville, but not so far he couldn't get there and back in one day. We called ourselves Mr. and Mrs. Baxter, and Bertie said he was a salesman and looking over the territory. That's what he was doing, all right. Friday Stan and his two boys met him in Knoxville and they pulled it. Bertie and Stan split the dough two ways, and Stan and Ronnie and Fatso went to Stoker Hill, and Bertie came back to our room in Darson."

"Was that the final split?"

"No. The idea was for me and Bertie to hang around for a while in Darson, then check out and come up here. The way they arranged it, Bertie and Stan would each get two shares to one apiece for Ronnie and Fatso."

I said, "It hasn't turned out so badly after all. You're here with the rest of the money and you have a man to share this room with you, even though it doesn't happen to be the same man whose clothes were waiting for him in that closet."

"Why, honey," she said happily, "don't tell me you're jealous of poor Bertie!"

"Let's say I'm squeamish."

"Sure, we'll get rid of the clothes." She dropped down on my lap, snuggling in that kittenish way of hers.

During a kiss I heard a car arrive. Outside the house a man said, "Keep the change," and the car drove off

and the man said, "I had a little accident, baby," and Elsa's voice said, "Someday you'll break your neck, darling," and he said, "That lousy road," and the voices drifted off.

"That's Stan." Jeanie told me what I had already assumed. "He'll want to see me right away." She left my lap. "Bring up some water, honey, so I can wash?"

I pulled out the pail from under the washstand. It wasn't particularly clean, and neither was the basin.

On the way out to the pump I passed the living room, off the downstairs center hall. Ronnie was in there with the short, fat man I had seen outside the service station in Stoker Hill. I recognized him by his plaid shirt. Fatso, of course. I heard my name mentioned—that is, Prof—but I didn't pause to listen.

It was lighter outside the house than inside, but the mountains were gone. A breeze smelling of growing things had come up. I pumped and water gurgled in the well and gushed out.

Somewhere near me there were voices. I looked about in the gloaming and located two shapes sitting with their backs to me on a wooden bench some distance away. Elsa Crocker's blonde head leaned on a man's shoulder. His arm was about her waist.

I rinsed out the pail and for a minute did no pumping. In the silence I could distinguish words.

"I don't like it," the man said. "Why'd the crazy kid bring him?"

"That's Jeanie for you," Elsa said.

"She's going up in the world," he said. "From Bertie Bride to Prof Glow."

"I don't think that matters to Jeanie," she said. "She's too elemental. She lost her man and had to have another right away. This one isn't quite as handsome as Bertie, but certainly much nicer."

"How long did he say he's staying?"

"He didn't say, but probably as long as Jeanie."

Stan Crocker grunted. "I shouldn't kick. I been worried she'd get picked up or lam with the other half of the

dough. Maybe it's a good thing there's somebody here to keep her happy while the cops are looking for her."

The creaking of the pump handle attracted their attention. They turned on the bench. I pretended to be unaware of them and filled the pail to the brim. On the way to the house water sloshed on my shoes.

Jeanie lay stretched out on the patchwork quilt in her underwear. She said, "Ain't it lovely here, honey?"

"Yes."

"Make yourself comfortable. At least take off that necktie. Did you bring any sports clothes?"

"Some, but there's no point changing tonight."

Outside the voices of Elsa Crocker and her husband approached the house. Stan would come up here or very soon we would have to go down to him. He would be the toughest hurdle.

I extracted from my wallet my driver's license and operator's license and union card. One at a time I burned them in an ash tray on the dresser.

Jeanie lifted her soapy face from the washbasin. "What're you doing?"

"Destroying my identity," I said.

Chapter Nine

JEANIE was getting into a summery white dress when somebody knocked. With my hand on the knob, I waited until she had straightened the shoulder straps before I opened the door. A thickset man stepped quickly into our room.

"Hi, Stan," Jeanie greeted him. "They tell me you read the news in the papers."

"I sure did. And I've been listening to it on my car radio." He turned his head to me. "So you're Prof Glow? I'm Stan Crocker."

We shook hands.

His shoulders were impressive. He hadn't more to them than I, but his made him look top-heavy because he was built considerably closer to the ground. What hair he had left was clipped close around the edges. Unlike the others, he wasn't one to discard city clothes simply because he was in the country. He wore a conservative pin-stripe suit and a white dress shirt and a subdued gray necktie. He could have been coming home from an office or from a classroom. I wasn't sure what I had expected a boss hold-up man to look like, but his very ordinary face wasn't one that would make you unusually nervous if you met it in an alley. He was well into his forties.

"Staying long?" he asked me amiably.

"That depends on Jeanie."

"The heat's on her and she knows too much. If the cops pick her up, we're all in the soup."

Jeanie said petulantly, "You think I'd sing?"

"Dames!" he explained to me. "You see how it is, Prof. She has to stay here."

"Suits me," I said. "I came east so I wouldn't be seen around for a while."

Stan didn't care for that. "Somebody gunning for you? We got enough troubles of our own here."

I made myself smile patronizingly. "A businessman like me has more trouble dodging subpoenas than slugs. A state investigating committee wants to ask me questions. I prefer not to answer them just yet. Of course, if I'm not welcome . . ."

"Hell, Prof, I didn't mean that. Proud to have you. D'you play chess?"

"Not well."

"Too bad. The only one here can give me a game is Ronnie, and he stinks." He looked at Jeanie. "So you managed to bring it with you."

"In there." Negligently she nudged the valise with one of the brown-and-white play shoes into which she had changed.

"What happened?" he asked.

"All I know is Bertie went out around twelve o'clock for cigars. Monday morning that was. A minute after he left I heard shooting. I looked out the window. Bertie was laying on the sidewalk. He was so still I knew he was dead, but they were still blazing away at him. I grabbed this bag that had the dough in it and tore down the stairs and out the back door."

"You mean it was a raid and they didn't surround the house?"

"They must've got there just as Bertie was coming out," Jeanie said. "They were busy shooting it out with him and I had a chance to run across the back yard. I climbed over a fence and walked up a street and came to some woods. I hid behind the bushes for a few hours. The landlady must've seen me leave and described my dress. If I'd known, I would've changed it right there."

"Did you have time to take your clothes too?"

"Bertie had made a false bottom on this bag for the dough and put some of my clothes on top. Most of my stuff's still in the Darson boardinghouse or the cops got it. Anyway, after a while I walked through the woods and came out on a road and got a lift."

"I heard on the radio you were seen getting into a car just outside Darson."

"Well, I was lucky. I kept away from trains and I don't know how many lifts I got before I reached New York."

"Where did he come in?" Stan indicated me with a thumb.

"In New York. I would've got in touch with you if you had a phone here. My God, you'd think Hank never heard of modern inventions." She was completely composed, completely glib. "I was tired and figured on staying in New York for a day or two before I came on to Stoker Hill. I was walking along Seventh Avenue when who did I meet but Prof Glow. You remember last June Bertie told you I got to know Prof pretty good when we were on the West Coast."

Stan glanced at the bed. "I didn't get the idea you knew him this good."

Jeanie actually blushed, or made herself blush—a picture of youthful undefiled modesty. Shyly she said, "There was nothing between me and Prof till last night."

"Isn't this exclusively my concern and Jeanie's?" I put in. "I wasn't informed that a high moral standard was required of Hank's paying guests."

"Bertie was my pal," Stan said.

"But now he's dead," Jeanie pointed out with sweet reasonableness.

"Yeah, he's dead," Stan said dryly. "Go on, Jeanie."

"I met Prof on Seventh Avenue, like I said. He'd shaved off his mustache and he was a bit heavier, but I recognized him right off. He'd read in the papers all about the Knoxville caper and how they'd shot Bertie and were after me. He bought me a dinner and we talked and I told him about Hank's place here, where I was bound for, and—well, here we are."

"Go on, Jeanie," Stan said.

"That's the whole story."

"You left out the important part. Bertie was the most careful guy I knew. How'd the cops catch up with him in Darson?"

"How should I know? Maybe somebody fingered him."

"Who?"

"My God, all I know is there was shooting and I looked out and there was poor Bertie dead on the sidewalk. Maybe he was recognized by somebody in Darson."

"Nobody knew he was on the Knoxville job except us here in Stoker Hill and you."

She threw her cigarette into an ash tray. "Say, listen! Maybe he was recognized leaving the plant."

"We were masked. It went off without a hitch."

"What do you want from me? The cops didn't take me into their confidence about how they found out. They damn near caught me too. Look what I went through to bring the dough here to you. I didn't have to, but I played square with you all the way, didn't I?"

"Sure you did, Jeanie." Stan's tone was placating. "But we got to know the answers to protect ourselves."

"Well, don't ask me. You ought to be grateful I got here with the dough. And you ought to thank Prof for helping me bring it from New York."

"Many thanks, Prof," Stan said.

I would have been happier without those words of appreciation. I waved a hand as if to say it was nothing, that people were all the time doing such little favors for each other; and the atmosphere in the room was quite friendly.

"Now that we have all the dough together," Stan said, "let's get the split over with."

Jeanie fluffed her hair. "I'm in no hurry."

"But the boys are. They're not going to be able to spend it for a while because they're not going anywhere, but they want their hands on it. Let's go downstairs."

He took over possession of the valise, carried it out.

I lingered to turn out the lamp. Jeanie came close to me and whispered, "Stan had me a bit worried, but we're in, honey." She squeezed my arm. "Glad you came?"

"Yes."

In darkness we made our way hand in hand out to the hall and down the stairs.

Light flowed from the living room, or what would more properly be called the parlor in a house with as many years behind it as this. Stan had placed the valise on a table under a hanging kerosene lamp; he was opening it as Ronnie, still bare-chested, looked on. The round little man in the plaid shirt had been about to close the door. He pulled it wide open to let us enter.

"Hi, Fatso," Jeanie said. "Meet Prof Glow."

He seemed somewhat awed of me and became flustered when Prof Glow, the big shot, shook his hand.

At the table Stan grunted, "Looks like all of it." He had lifted the false bottom out of the valise. Fatso and Jeanie and I joined Stan at the table.

Compactly that half of the payroll loot covered the real bottom of the valise. Each neat stack was bound by its original bank wrapper.

Ronnie said bitterly, "Fifty grand Bertie claimed it would be. Maybe sixty."

"Twenty ain't peanuts," Fatso said.

"It ain't fifty or sixty like Bertie claimed it would be." Ronnie looked at Stan. "A lousy twenty grand."

Stan said softly, "You wouldn't have an idea, Ronnie, there was more than twenty grand?"

Ronnie lowered his popeyes. "I'm not saying you and Bertie held out."

"I'm glad you're not." Stan smiled; I would have been mighty uneasy if he had smiled at me like that. "These are the breaks. So it isn't fifty. It's a little over twenty. We're lucky Jeanie got here. Otherwise it would be only ten. Any more complaints, Ronnie?"

"I wasn't complaining." Ronnie glanced about and found a change of subject. "How come Prof is in on it?"

"He's not." Stan transferred his smile to me, and this time it was wholly affable. "Mind leaving us for a while?"

I not only didn't mind; I very much preferred not to be present. I said, "I'll go pick up my car."

"Hank will drive you," Stan offered.

"I'd rather walk, if somebody will lend me a flashlight."

Stan pulled one out of his hip pocket and accompanied

me to the door. Jeanie, sitting cross-legged on a mission oak chair, blew me a kiss. Stan closed the door after me.

A balmy breeze made the night fine for walking. As soon as I was in among the woods, I felt an easing of my nerves, my muscles, even my bones. I had been more on edge than I had admitted to myself. Now here I was going away from that house, and there was nothing to stop me from going on all the way home.

There was nothing to stop me and if I drove all night I would be back in my apartment in Queens by mid-morning. And I would find Marjorie doing the minimum of house cleaning to keep the apartment in some sort of order or reading the current best-seller or already watching television, and with a martyred smile she would lift her face to be kissed, and she would say, "I knew you wouldn't stay with that illiterate slut for any length of time, Larry, because you're really not the type," and I would make no answer because I would have no answer, and I would shower and take a nap and wake up to—what? I would wake up to Lawrence B. Knight, who, in the final analysis, hadn't run off with anybody or from anybody so much as he had run away from himself, and had hardly got started when he was back in meek confession of utter defeat.

I reached the car. It was possible, with enough effort, to turn the car around here and head it back to New York. I hesitated for perhaps five seconds, then drove back to that ancient gray house where three holdup men and a girl who was my bedmate were dividing up the loot from an armed robbery.

As the car reached the knoll on which the house stood, a shape moved across the outer fringe of the headlights. I glimpsed bare legs and blonde hair before the headlights swung away. I pulled my coupé up beside the jeep.

An argument was going on inside the house. There was a jumble of furious voices, each trying to override the others. Jeanie's was the shrill one, and another almost as high-pitched with anger said, "I'll be goddamned if I will!" and the voices tapered off to mutterings.

I got out of the car. Under a maple standing alone and magnificent where the ground started to slope away to the meadow, a tiny spot of light glowed, faded, glowed again. I snapped on the flashlight and walked to the cigarette smoker.

As protection from the evening coolness she had put on a thin cotton jacket. It hardly reached her thighs, which looked burnished in the flashlight beam. Because of the rolled-up shorts, she appeared to be wearing nothing but the jacket and open sandals on her bare feet. Leaning against the tree trunk, she watched me approach.

"Your light is in my eyes," Elsa Crocker said.

"Sorry."

I turned it off. Here under the tree starlight could not penetrate, but whenever she drew on the cigarette the lower part of her face was gouged dimly out of darkness.

She said conversationally, "Did you drive from the West Coast?"

Every question any of them asked was a possible trap. This one was obvious. She must have noticed the New York license plate.

"I came east by train," I told her. "Last night when Jeanie asked me to drive her here, I borrowed that Chevrolet from a friend in New York. He said I could use it as long as I wanted to."

"A man like you must have many people under obligation to him."

She dropped the cigarette and stepped on it. I could see nothing at all of her now, but the sense of her femininity so close to me had a physical impact.

"I had an idea Prof Glow was older," she said.

It occurred to me that she might be more dangerous than Stan or Ronnie.

"I'm not exactly a kid," I said. "Did we ever meet before? I'm sure I would have remembered you."

"No, we never met, but . . ." She didn't finish it.

The argument in the house again rose noisily. Jeanie's voice dominated the rest, then Stan roared, "Shut up, all of you!" and abruptly there was a silence as deep as

that under this tree. Stan was very much the boss here.

I said, "They're sore, I suppose, because there isn't enough take after all that planning and risk and one of them getting killed."

Elsa uttered a short, bitter laugh. "There's never enough. Before I met Stan, he had served two years in the pen, and all he would have got out of the job was three hundred dollars. Were you ever in jail?"

"I've been lucky."

"Not lucky. Big. The big shots like you get it all and are never hurt."

"Must I apologize for being big?"

"Oh, that's not it," she said wearily. "But this was going to be the last time. Stan promised me. The big caper. Fifty thousand dollars at least. That was what Bertie Bride sold Stan. Just this one, Stan told me, and after it he would lay off for good. But now he'll have an excuse after a few months. It's never enough."

I had nothing to say. Silence merged with darkness.

"I'm going in," she said suddenly. "Good night."

"Good night."

Starlight touched her when she stepped out from under the tree, and she became a shadow drifting toward the house. I restrained the impulse to turn on the flashlight and watch her walk, watch her thighs ripple and her hips undulate.

After a while I went up to my room and lit the kerosene lamp and took off my shirt and shoes and sat waiting for Jeanie.

Ten minutes later she entered, carrying a paper bag. Petulantly she flung it on the dresser.

"Of all the nerve!" she burst out. "You know what Ronnie and Fatso had the nerve to say? They said I shouldn't get a cent. I lugged that dough all the way here from Darson, and they claim just because Bertie's dead I shouldn't get his two shares."

I didn't comment. I wished she would leave me completely out of this.

"They couldn't pull anything like that on me," she

went on. "I was right here when Bertie planned the caper with them and they agreed how they would split. Two shares for Bertie, two for Stan, one each for Ronnie and Fatso. O.K., it wasn't as much as Bertie said it would be, but it was still around thirty-five a share, and me getting Bertie's two shares would be seven grand for me. But the nerve of those guys, they said because Bertie's dead I'm not entitled to his. They said I wasn't his wife and got no right to his dough. I told them. I said, 'Didn't I level with you heels?' I said, 'I could've kept all the dough in my bag, the ten grand that was half the take, but like a dope I brought it here and I want Bertie's two shares.' That's what you get for being honest."

Jeanie removed her shoes.

"I imagine this was one of the more profitable capers," I said, "but so far I haven't been impressed by crime as one of the better-paying professions."

"Ask Prof Glow. He makes it pay."

"So Elsa said. The big shots always make out. The rest never do."

"You been talking to her?"

"Briefly."

"What d'you think of her?"

"I don't know. She's very quiet and seems to be lonely."

"She's a quiet one, but why lonely? She and Stan are nuts over each other. You're not lonely with a man you like." Jeanie yawned; her rage had melted away. "Stan's a pretty decent guy. He said we'd split five ways instead of the six they'd planned. Ronnie and Fatso didn't like it, but that's how it was. Stan got two shares and me and Ronnie and Fatso one apiece. It could've been worse. My cut is over four grand." She yawned some more. "I'm pooped, honey, all this traveling and everything. Let's hit the hay."

"All right."

I remained in the chair until she had finished dropping a pink nightgown over her head. She looked very sweet in it, quite girlish. As I changed into pajamas, she turned down the patchwork quilt and the two blankets. This

was Wednesday night and we had met for the first time on Monday, and here we were going not so much to bed as to sleep, a man and a girl already in the routine of living together.

There was a knock on the door.

"Yes?" I said.

"Them two hundred bucks," Hank's voice said through the door. "You promised you'd pay tonight."

Jeanie whispered from the bed, "On the dresser, honey."

I dug out of the paper bag a bundle of twenty-dollar bills. I broke the wrapper and counted out ten bills and opened the door wide enough to thrust them out to Hank. "Thanks, Prof."

I locked the door and finished buttoning my pajama jacket. All of a sudden I started to laugh.

"What's so funny?" Jeanie said.

"Probably not very funny. Up to now this was a kind of lark. A caper in the dictionary meaning of the word rather than the gangster meaning. But I didn't quite bargain on becoming a kept man, and on holdup loot at that. What's required is a sense of humor."

"Don't you ever stop talking silly?" she said testily. "Put out the light and come to bed."

I put out the light and went to bed.

Chapter Ten

THE best view of all was from the outhouse. In front of it the ground fell away so sharply that when you left the door open you had an impression of being suspended in space above the sweep of rocky meadows undulating toward the distant, thickly wooded mountains.

An up-to-date note had been injected. Instead of the traditional Sears catalogue, there were New Yorker magazines and comic books.

I stepped out into the morning sun. In T shirt and lightweight slacks and fresh from a cold-water shave in my room, I felt cool and presentable. I followed a footpath past the breezeway to a rear door and entered the kitchen.

Both Crockers were in the kitchen—Elsa washing clothes and Stan eating breakfast. We exchanged cheery good mornings.

This was the largest room in the house, as was sensible. Particularly in the winter, when the heavily embossed cast-iron wood stove was the main source of heat, it became sitting room and sometimes bedroom as well as kitchen and dining room. The stove wasn't used in this weather except as a work table; water was boiling on a smoky kerosene range that stood beside it. The only modern touch was a wooden counter in which was set a two-basin sink, but there it ended, without even an indoor pump. Every drop of water used had to be lugged in from the well in front of the house.

"Would you like your eggs fried or scrambled?" Elsa asked me.

"Scrambled, please."

She scraped soapsuds from her arms and set fire to a second kerosene burner. This morning she was all in

white, polo shirt and slacks and sneakers, and the contrast enriched the bronze of her bare legs and arms and throat.

The huge round table was covered with red-and-white checked oilcloth. No two chairs were alike, except that all were painted red. I pulled one out and sat down opposite Stan.

This morning he had discarded his jacket, and he had made one other concession to the season and place by leaving unbuttoned the starched collar of his shirt.

"Where's Jeanie?" he asked.

"She's still asleep."

Stan put down his coffee cup. "It's ten-thirty. What's she think she is, a grand lady?"

I said, "The poor kid's had a rough time these last few days. Besides, what's wrong with sleeping late in the country?"

"What's right about Elsa's getting up early and making breakfast without help from Jeanie?"

Elsa turned from the stove. "She'll make lunch, darling."

"Yeah, like the last time she was here," Stan growled. "She'll start making lunch and say she's stuck and call you to help her and you'll finish it. Nuts to that. You do too much work around here, baby."

"I'll be glad to pitch in," I offered. "Just give me orders. Can I start by doing the dishes?"

Elsa brought me a glass of juice. "It's Fatso's turn this morning. I'm sure Jeanie will co-operate. Do you care for tomato juice?"

"My favorite."

"I hate the stuff," Stan said. "Baby, tell Hank to buy some fresh oranges for a change." He drained his coffee and rose. "I'm driving to Stoker Hill in the jeep to see how bad my car was damaged yesterday."

As he passed his wife on the way out of the kitchen, he affectionately patted her hip.

And as soon as he was gone and we were alone together, there was tension in the kitchen. The way there had been

last night under the maple tree. I couldn't quite explain it to myself. I sat back and looked at her scrambling eggs.

Through a window sunlight poured over her, brilliant on her piled-up corn-silk hair. Her white shorts were rolled up as high as her blue shorts had been last night. She had the thighs for it and you couldn't blame her for showing them off. My impression of her last evening had been that she was somewhat lush-bodied. But that wasn't it at all. She was firmly built, gracefully curved. Her ripeness was the firm ripeness of a peach picked at the right moment.

She was one of the few women I had ever seen, perhaps the only one, who looked every bit a woman.

She brought a plate of bacon and eggs to me, and her full breasts, molded by the rather thin polo shirt, stirred as she walked. Her eyes met mine as I stared at her. She flushed and placed the plate in front of me with her face averted and returned to the sink.

I said to her back as she resumed washing clothes, "Don't you find it dull here?"

"Not very, as long as Stan is with me."

She was telling me off, though I hadn't meant it that way. I had a woman of my own, didn't I? I ate.

After a while I said, "You're not like the others here."

"Aren't I?"

"That's what I mean—that 'Aren't I?' While I don't approve of that rather affected contraction, only an educated person would use it. And you seem—well, refined."

"Refined!" she echoed, and uttered a brief laugh. Leaning against the kitchen sink, she faced me. "We've something in common, Prof. They say you were once a teacher."

And Larry Knight and Prof Glow had that in common too. To that extent I could remain in character.

"Did you teach?" I said.

"I never got that far. I quit teachers' college after a year." Her mouth went wry. "Somehow you sink lower when you start off being refined. Even as you, Prof. You and your houses."

"Houses?" I muttered before I remembered. Prof Glow's main source of income was from brothels. I said, "None of us is in a position to discuss morals."

"No, but I think there are limits. Stan is what he is, but he has standards. He respects women, and he very much respects me. Even if he stopped caring for me, he would die before he did to me what you did to Mary Creed."

A shrug could be my only comment. I would have to do a lot of shrugging here.

"Do you take coffee or milk?" she said.

"Coffee, please."

Elsa placed a cup and saucer before me and brought the coffeepot from the stove. She stood close to me as she poured, and if I had moved my hand an inch or two I would have touched her thigh.

"I knew Mary Creed well before she went west to try her luck in Hollywood," she told me. "She didn't make it and then got mixed up with you."

I reached for the milk bottle and the sugar bowl. I stirred the coffee.

She was back at the sink. "Mary used to write me. I know what you used to be to each other. And recently she wrote what you had done to her and how she had ended up in one of your houses. How could you?"

I drank. She kept looking at me, and I wondered what Prof Glow would have replied, if anything, and if he would have cringed inwardly the way I did under her contempt.

"Then you don't deny it?" she said, refusing to let go of the subject in the face of my silence.

Another shrug, but even the taciturn Prof Glow would eventually have to open his mouth for more than drinking coffee. I drawled, "I'm not in the habit of discussing my personal affairs with everybody I meet."

That, at any rate, ended it.

I set down the empty cup. "Thanks for the breakfast, Elsa. Is there anything I can do around here? I wield a mean broom."

"Hank does all the cleaning," she said crisply.

She didn't care for Prof Glow. Along with his name, I had taken over his sins. I wandered out of the house.

"Morning, Prof."

Fatso sprawled on a reclining aluminum chair under the big sugar maple. His plaid shirt was open, showing flabby, hairless flesh. The comic book he was reading dipped. I sauntered over to him.

"Prof, I wanna ask you something. Did Hi Globeman ever speak to you about me?"

Another name. Jeanie had assured me that all I would have to do was remain smilingly uncommunicative, but it wasn't turning out to be easy.

"About you?" I muttered, sparring.

"Tom Evergreen's my real name. Or maybe he said Fatso Evergreen. I seen Hi last winter in Philly and he said maybe you'd have a job for me. Did he speak to you, huh, Prof?"

"I don't recall."

"I'd like to tie up with a big organization like yours. Safer. You don't have so many worries. I'll do anything, Prof. I'm a good man. Ask Hi."

At the south side of the house Hank was cutting wild grass with a scythe. That would be about the only graceful thing he did. I watched the clean, co-ordinated movements of his wiry old body.

"You got room for me?" Fatso persisted. "I bet there's hundreds of guys on your payroll."

"Don't rush me."

"Yeah, sure. But keep me in mind, huh, Prof?"

"We'll see," I said.

"How's Hi doing?"

I shrugged.

Elsa Crocker appeared around the rear corner of the house. On her hip she carried a small wicker basket.

"Fatso, you're to wash the dishes now," she called.

"In a minute."

Where Hank was scything, a clothesline was strung between two small trees. She set the basket down on the

ground and started to hang up clothes. Dazzling sunlight glinted in her hair, laved her bronzed skin. As she lifted her arms to the clothesline, her breasts lifted also, tightly against the polo shirt.

"Man, is she stacked!" Fatso had sat up. "I'll tell you about Stan. He don't look at another dame. Why should he? Where would he find anything else as good as that?"

Hank was leaning on his scythe and speaking to her. And beyond them Ronnie had appeared. His palm rolled with steady rhythm on his bare chest, but the rest of him was as motionless as the outhouse against which he stood.

It was as if her coming out to hang clothes had drawn every man in the place but her husband.

"Does she do the washing too?" I asked Fatso.

"Naw. Hank takes our laundry in to Concord. Anyway, we don't wear so much around here. She don't either. Them's her own things." Fatso cackled. "Lookit, a brassiere. I would've bet she didn't wear 'em."

Elsa picked up the basket. "Fatso, the dishes!" she called.

He pushed himself up from the chair. "Orders from the big boss herself," he told me with a sheepish grin.

Elsa had returned into the house. Ronnie, having nothing left to watch, moved off. Only Hank and I remained outside.

I walked over to Hank, who was honing his scythe. "It's going to be another scorcher today," I said.

"Lucky you ain't in New York. Them sidewalks is like fryin' pans." He pushed his frayed Panama hat back over his wispy gray hair and scowled. "Trouble's comin'."

"About what?"

"That woman. Elsa. I'm gittin' old and you got yourself a nice piece of your own. But them two boys, Ronnie and Fatso. Young bucks. Nothin' for them to do and no woman around for them. And there's Elsa paradin' around half naked all the time. It ain't healthy. Bound to be trouble."

"They would be afraid of Stan."

"He'll tear the heart out of anybody puts a finger on

her. But young men. Sap runnin' high. Especially that Ronnie. I ain't worried so much about Fatso. No harm in him. But that Ronnie. All the time lookin' at her with his popeyes like he wants to eat her up." Hank shook his head. "I don't hanker for no trouble. It'll be bad for me on account this is my place."

I recalled the first words I had heard Elsa utter last evening when I had come upon her and Ronnie in front of the house. Something like "I'm not going to tell him, but don't do that again." Evidently Ronnie was ridden by an emotion stronger than fear of Stan.

"Why don't you ask Stan to send Ronnie away?" I suggested.

"He don't want Ronnie runnin' around loose while the heat's on 'em so strong. Anyway, I'd be losin' Ronnie's board." Hank mopped his brow with a blue bandanna. "I gotta get this patch cleared."

I said, "Is there any swimming around here?"

"There's a crik down that hollow behind them trees. But you won't do no swimmin'. Not deep enough."

"Is it deep enough for a bath?"

"Some of 'em do it."

Doubtless he himself never had.

I followed a footpath down from the knoll. Through a copse of young trees the creek ran shaded and clear. At this spot it was some twenty feet across and fairly free of rocks. The trees formed a protective screen all around, particularly from the house. I would, at any rate, be able to get wet.

I shed my clothes and stepped in. Icy water stabbed my legs. I hesitated, then heroically waded forward. At the deepest, water reached my knees and certainly didn't get any warmer. Clenching my teeth, I sat down like an old woman dunking herself at the beach. After I'd caught my breath, I ducked my head under. That was as much of that bath as I could endure. I fled.

A flat rock jutted partly out into the creek from the bank. I stretched out on it and soon stopped shivering. The sun felt fine on my wet body. I was at peace.

Somebody approached humming "Loch Lomond" considerably off key. Startled out of a half doze, I sat up. There was probably not enough time to leap for my clothes or, closer at hand, a tree. I twisted my torso away from the path and looked over my shoulder. Jeanie appeared in a strapless sun dress. She had brought along two Turkish towels and a cake of soap.

"Hank told me you were down here," she said. "Were you in already?"

"Brrr!" I said.

"It's not so bad when you get used to it."

I propped myself up on an elbow and watched her shrug out of the sun dress and kick off her slippers. Those two items had been all her attire. Soap in hand, she nonchalantly stepped into the creek. I laughed aloud at her expression of shock. She cowered in water halfway up to her knees, and at that moment she was a dead ringer for September Morn—tight and slender and cream-skinned and so young. After a moment she let herself fall in full-length, an act of sheer courage. She came up sputtering and serenely proceeded to soap herself.

Under the circumstances, I couldn't remain craven. I joined her in the creek and took over use of the soap. After we had both ducked under to wash off the soap, we scrambled onto the big rock and let the sun dry us.

"Ain't this lovely, honey?" she said.

"Um. This and you both."

"Why did you run out on me this morning?"

"You were sleeping peacefully."

"Don't ever do that to me again. I was so disappointed when I woke up and you weren't there."

"I forgot that a kept man has to keep himself on tap."

Pouting, she put an inch or two of space between us. "Do you always have to spoil it by talking that way?"

"It's true, isn't it?"

"No, it ain't. I told you if you feel like that about the money you can pay it back sometime."

I slid an arm under her shoulders. "Look, Jeanie. Why do we have to stay here?"

"You know why."

"I've been thinking that you'd be as safe if we went off and rented a bungalow in some remote place."

"This is remote. Besides, Stan wouldn't let me go. The cops have pictures of me. I told Stan last night. Bertie was a camera bug and he had loads of snapshots of me in his bag that the cops got hold of in Darson. Stan says those pictures are already in every police station and maybe in the papers too. He don't care what happens to me so much, but he's scared I'll sing if I'm picked up. He's watching out for himself and his boys, and I can't blame him." She snuggled. "Anyway, what's wrong with this?"

I said, "Did you ever hear of Hi Globeman and Mary Creed?"

"Who're they?"

"Hi Globeman works for Prof Glow. Fatso knows him and asked about him."

"Lots of guys work for Prof. I never knew but a few in his organization. What'd you tell Fatso?"

"I brushed him off. Mary Creed's name was brought up by Elsa. It appears that they were friends and that Mary Creed was once Prof Glow's mistress or something like that."

"I don't know nothing about his girl friends. Like I told you, don't say yes or no. You don't talk about your affairs. If they get too nosy, tell 'em off. But friendly and refined. Not tough."

"I'm learning how to act refined," I said.

There was no breeze. The sun was as hot as the water had been cold. We were dry now without having had to use the towels.

I said, "We'd better put some clothes on. Somebody might come down."

She stirred against me. Her skin felt very warm to the touch.

"This is heaven," she murmured.

"Uh-huh."

"Love me, honey?"

"Uh-huh. But our privacy might be invaded at any moment."

"We'll hear anybody coming."

"I doubt that we'll be listening."

"I don't care. You ran out on me this morning. You can't again. You can't now, honey."

The sun blazed down on us.

Chapter Eleven

THURSDAY the heat wave broke. Friday evening it started to rain, and for two dreary nights and days it didn't let up.

Saturday afternoon dampness invaded the house, mingling with a chilliness that additional clothing couldn't banish from our bones. It was more like September than July. Elsa suggested building a fire in either the kitchen stove or the parlor Franklin stove, but Hank had driven off to shop for food, and nobody else roused himself.

I sat on a mission oak chair at a parlor window with a pile of popular magazines Elsa had given me permission to bring down from her room. I leafed through one after another and couldn't maintain interest and looked out at the gray rain swirling over the fields. Behind me Stan and Ronnie played chess. Fatso, his lips moving soundlessly, struggled with the harder words in his comic book and occasionally asked me to define one. In the kitchen Jeanie and Elsa were baking pies.

A household like any others, its members bored by the need to keep out of the rain.

Suddenly Ronnie exclaimed, "Aw, nuts!" He pushed his chair back from the table. "No radio, no television, no nothing. At least we should go to the movies."

Stan picked up a white bishop and held it. "You'd get movies in the pen. Once every week if they pick out a good one for you."

"Hell, you let us go to the store in Stoker Hill. What's so different with Concord?"

"Concord has cops," Stan said.

Fatso looked up from his comic book. "It'd be a twenty-year rap, Ronnie. Life for you, maybe, on account of

you're a three-time loser. We got plenty to eat here and soft beds. I never had it so good."

"You!" Ronnie sneered. "You got it good when they let you sit on your tail all day." He spoke to Stan. "We're a thousand miles from Knoxville, and a guy's gotta live."

"You don't want a movie. You'd head straight for a bar and then for a dame." Stan set down the bishop, endangering the black queen. "You'd get stinkin' drunk. You'd go on a tear. Maybe your tongue would waggle."

"You ain't my nursemaid," Ronnie grumbled. "You don't tell me when I should wipe my nose."

Stan said softly, "It's your move."

Ronnie placed his hands flat on the table. Over the chessmen his protruding eyes rested bleakly on Stan. A killer's eyes, I thought, the first time I had ever seen anything like them. And that was, after all, what he was by trade, and Stan too and Fatso—men who worked with guns in their hands and masks on their faces and lived always in violence and fear and resentment.

Stan didn't trouble to look up from the board.

"Prof, you got a big organization." Fatso was anxiously appealing to me. "You know all the ropes. How long d'you think we should sit here tight?"

I very much didn't want any part of this.

Stan turned to Fatso. "I'm running this show, not Prof or anybody else."

"That's right," I said, perhaps too eagerly. "I run my business and you men run yours."

Stan said, "Your move, Ronnie."

Slowly Ronnie pulled his hands off the table. He moistened his lips. You could see how he hated to knuckle under to his boss and how he dared not to. Then he lifted his queen and the tension was over. Fatso returned to the derring-do of comic-book criminals and I left the parlor.

I wandered through the breezeway and into the barn. The roof was in better condition than the walls; rain trickled through in only a few spots. In a dry corner I found cordwood and kindling. This would give me something to do. I carried a load of wood into the kitchen.

Jeanie was trimming the edges of an unbaked pie and Elsa was sticking one into a portable tin oven on top of the kerosene range. Both were in slacks and sweaters. Jeanie's outfit made her look boyish, but nothing could detract from Elsa's intrinsic womanliness.

"Oh, good," Jeanie said when I entered with the wood. "Now we'll be able to bake the rest of the pies in a real oven."

Elsa watched me put in paper and kindling as if she'd never seen it done before.

I lit the paper. "Anything wrong with the way I build a fire?"

"I'm not used to men who stir themselves without being nagged," Elsa said dryly.

Jeanie put an arm about me. "Isn't he sweet, Elsa? I told you." And she kissed my cheek and with playful sensuality rolled her hips against me.

I wished she wouldn't exhibit such possessiveness in public. There was plenty of time and opportunity up in our room. Perhaps too much. I was especially annoyed by her doing it in front of Elsa. I eased away from her and raised the stove lid and added another log.

Pie and coffee brought the other men into the kitchen, and the warm stove kept them there. Somebody suggested poker. Fatso dug up cards and we seated ourselves around the big kitchen table. Everybody joined in, including the women. When Hank returned from Concord, it became a seven-handed game.

We played fifty-cent stud, terrifically steep for me, who was used to five-and-ten. But here I was Prof Glow, a professional gambler among other things, and indicated polite tolerance of such small stakes. In my wallet were thirty-six dollars.

I won a bit and lost a bit. By the time we knocked off for supper, I had fourteen dollars left.

After we had eaten and the dishes had been stacked in the sink, we resumed with a dollar limit. On my first hand I pulled two pairs, but was completely wiped out by Stan's three jacks.

I didn't know what to do then. Prof Glow couldn't confess himself broke, and he couldn't say he wanted no more poker when he had just sat down to the resumption of the game.

Jeanie excused herself and left the room. She was aware of my predicament; I had an idea where she was going. Elsa dealt. I caught kings back to back, but I had to fold because I hadn't a dollar to open. The hand wasn't quite finished when Jeanie returned. She leaned against my back and kissed my ear. "For luck, honey," she said, and I felt her hand slip into my jacket pocket and leave something there. It turned out to be a stake of several hundred.

By the time we knocked off at four in the morning, I had lost most of that roll.

Next day, Sunday, nobody came down until noon. The rain was unrelenting. Still poker weather. At two o'clock we were at it again, and again the stakes were doubled. Two-dollar stud was madness for anybody like me, but I was beginning to absorb the point of view of the others, that money came hard and went easily.

Jeanie slipped another roll of bills into my pocket. I continued to lose.

"You big-shot gamblers!" Fatso chuckled. "You get in a small game like this, Prof, and you can't buy the time of day. I heard you once bet Giggy fifty grand on a card and won. That true, Prof?"

I gave him an enigmatic smile.

"Chip or fold," Ronnie growled at Fatso.

Ronnie was a normally sullen player. The fact that he was an even heavier loser than I didn't improve his disposition.

"Up two bucks," Hank said. He put his grizzled face close to the table to peep at his hole card. He seemed to play mostly by prayer and hunch. Perhaps that was what was required, for with irritating consistency he won.

I turned down my cards and considered the other players. Stan stuck strictly to mathematics. When the odds were against him, he couldn't be lured in; when they were on his side, he squeezed every possible cent out of the pot.

That was how he and Bertie Bride must have planned the Knoxville caper. Jeanie's play varied between reckless and cautious spurts, according to mood; it was never possible to figure out her hand from the way she chipped. Fatso chattered continually, gloating over good luck, agonizing long and loud over bad. Elsa played the way she did everything else, quietly and competently, and appeared to be in the game only because everybody else was.

It's been said that poker is a good indication of character. Perhaps. But what about me? I was an angle player. I couldn't check myself, even at these stakes. In the modest games I played once a month or so with friends in Queens, I was known as a speculator, a taker of chances. I who had seldom taken a chance in anything else until the last few days. Had my poker playing been all along an expression of the repressed inner man?

We didn't break up until an hour after sunrise.

The rain had ceased some time before, and a visible sun was rising through dispersing clouds. The orgy was over. We were cramped from too much sitting, logy from lack of sleep, stupefied from the overheated, smoke-filled kitchen. I sensed that winner and loser alike were now merely bored.

In our room I counted out thirty-six dollars and tucked the bills into my wallet. That was my own money, my original stake; I had to hold onto it as a small measure, very small, of financial independence. At least I would be able to buy cigarettes without asking Jeanie. Of the seven hundred dollars she had slipped to me during the two days, about a hundred remained. I had lost some six hundred dollars, a fortune to a schoolteacher.

Jeanie was already in bed. When she was sleepy, she got under the covers without dawdling. I told her how I had made out in the game.

"Drop it on the dresser," she said indifferently. "I won a couple of hundred, so together we're only four hundred behind."

"Let's not start that again," I said. "I owe you six hundred, plus two hundred for board. That's eight hun-

dred. By Wednesday, when we pay another week's board, it will be an even thousand."

I went to the window and breathed in the moist early-morning air. Stan came out with a pail, which he filled at the pump. Moments later I heard him ascend the stairs and enter the room across the hall. I thought of Elsa and Stan together in the intimacy of that room, as Jeanie and I were together in here; and I thought of how every moment during those two days of poker I had been acutely aware of Elsa sitting at the table with me. There had been moments, I remembered now, when, amid the smoke and chatter and suspense of falling cards, nobody else had seemed to be there, only the two of us, Elsa and I.

I didn't want to face up to what was happening to me.

"How are you fixed for dough, honey?" Jeanie asked from the bed.

I laid what money of hers I had left on the dresser and started to unbutton my shirt. "I've a few thousand saved, and a teacher's credit is good. You'll get your money."

"Someday I'll smack you across the mouth for talking like that," she said. "If you figure you have to pay me back the board dough, it's a hundred a week for your share. I'll pay my own."

"No. At least let me salvage that much pride."

"What's pride got to do with it?"

"Did you pay your own way with Bertie?"

"I didn't have no dough of my own when I was with Bertie. Now I have and you haven't. Honey, you make too much fuss over money."

At such moments I could respect her. I had known too many respectable, virtuous women who determined a man's eligibility as a bedmate by his financial rating.

In a burst of affection, I leaned over the bed and kissed her brow. Her arms pulled me down to her.

But that wasn't what I was after. There was no longer edge to desire, no longer driving hunger. I put her off.

"Tired, honey?" she said, and I said that I was.

But that wasn't it either. I was beginning to understand what it was.

Chapter Twelve

AT ONE O'CLOCK Monday afternoon I was up and dressed. Considering when we had gone to bed, that was an early rising. Jeanie slept on. As far as I could hear and see, so did everybody else.

In the kitchen I found a full pot of freshly made coffee on the kerosene range. That meant that Elsa had already been at work. I sliced a couple of peaches into a bowl of cereal and ate while the coffee heated. I was drinking my second cup of coffee when Elsa entered the kitchen.

"I see you've helped yourself," she said.

"I was properly brought up."

She gave me a curious sidelong glance. Evidently I had said the wrong thing.

"Would you care for scrambled eggs?" she said.

"I've had enough, thanks. Elsa, how would this household get along without you?"

She stooped to the sink cabinet and brought out a pot. "I'm going berry picking," she said, making it a flat and impersonal announcement.

Now that the storm was over and the temperature again up, she had returned to scant attire. Today she wore something more dashing above the rolled-up shorts than a halter or a polo shirt—a very much off-the-shoulders cotton jersey cut so wide and low as to deliberately and remorselessly tantalize the eye.

Holding the pot against her knee by the handle, she looked steadily at me. Our gazes locked, and it seemed to me that there was some sort of communication between us. I found it a little harder to breathe.

"May I go with you?" I said.

"If you wish."

She couldn't have sounded more indifferent, though

that didn't change my belief that she had waited for me to ask her. She pulled another pot out of the cabinet and handed it to me.

We descended the west slope of the knoll. I commented on how lush the vegetation was after the long rain. She had nothing to say to that or to anything else. I stopped speaking. Silently we walked side by side.

We reached the edge of a two-acre field of scattered high blueberry bushes. I side-stepped a rock and swerved against her, and our shoulders and hips touched. It was nothing at all, the briefest of inadvertent contacts, but she made it into something big. With a kind of violence she swung away from me.

"Am I that repulsive?" I said banteringly.

She strode to the nearest bush and started to pick blueberries. When I joined her, she moved on to the next bush.

"I can't imagine what I've done," I said.

"If you came to pick berries," she said tartly, "you'd better start."

So her quietness was all on the surface, I thought, a protective mantle that was slipping from her.

I picked. I discovered how little space blueberries covered at the bottom of a pot. After a while I took time off to light a cigarette.

Elsa was some fifty feet away. Her skin seemed to glow with an inner light, as if the sunlight were inside her shining out. I picked up my pot and went to her.

"Is this your private bush," I said, "or may two use it?"

Her head remained dipped as her fingers plucked berries low on the bush. The jersey didn't cover and couldn't restrain the rich upper slopes of her breasts.

I said, "Does anything about me in particular annoy you?"

"Yes." Her head lifted. "Who are you, really?"

We stood on opposite sides of the bush, and the sun focused us in its full glare.

"I don't understand," I hedged.

"You're not Prof Glow. You're not a cop either, or you

would have made your move the night the money was divided. Who are you?"

"I believe we've been introduced."

"I felt almost at once that you and Jeanie lied about you."

"Woman's intuition," I taunted.

"Perhaps. And there was your attitude, like offering to wash dishes and be helpful around the house. That's out of character for one of them."

"Them?"

"The other men here. The tough guys outside the law. Housework is demeaning; it's for women. And you have a woman. It's her duty to fetch and carry for you the way I do for Stan." She put a hand up to her brow, brushed back a strand of hair that had come loose from the tight bunch of it piled up on her head. "I'm not complaining about Stan. I like keeping house for him. What I'm trying to say is that Prof Glow would have the same attitudes, only more so. Because he's one of the biggest and richest in the rackets. He's used to giving orders and having them obeyed promptly. Everybody is eager to get on the right side of him. It wouldn't occur to him to pour his own glass of water."

"I'm on vacation. I hanker to be just one of the boys."

"You never could be. You're soft. Soft in a good way, and the bigger you are in the rackets, the harder you have to be."

"That's your evidence?"

"No." On the other side of the bush from me Elsa shook up the berries in her pot. "But Mary Creed is. You remember I spoke to you about her the day after you arrived. I asked you how you could have let her end up in one of your houses after what she'd been to you."

"I see. Since then you heard from Mary Creed."

She said tiredly, "There is no Mary Creed. I made her up. I was sure you weren't Prof Glow when you didn't deny knowing her."

"In short, her name was a trap."

"Yes." And Elsa demanded again, "Who are you?"

So I had been right when, the first night in darkness under the maple tree, I had told myself that she was the one to fear most. But now I didn't fear her.

"I'm nobody at all," I told her. "One of the anonymous masses. An unmarried, underpaid schoolteacher whose only brush with the law was when I received a parking ticket last year."

She refused to compromise with my attempt at flippancy. She said sternly, "How did you meet Jeanie?"

"I was the one who gave her the lift outside of Darson last Monday afternoon."

"What happened then?"

"Does it matter? The fact is I'm here and harming nobody."

"It matters a lot if you told anybody who Jeanie was and where you were going with her."

It was ridiculous to maintain that blueberry bush between us like a barrier. I stepped around it, and Elsa turned to me and stood in hot sunlight with her weight on one hip and her violet eyes troubled as she listened. I told her how Jeanie and I had spent the first night in a northern Virginia cabin and how in the morning I had found her gone and how in the evening she had turned up in my apartment for the valise.

When I finished, she burst out, "And then she endangered everybody by bringing you along. How typical of Jeanie! How irresponsible!"

"She knows she can trust me."

"In this rotten racket you can't trust any outsider. Often not an insider either." Elsa drew in her breath and spoke more quietly. "Oh, I suppose I can understand her taking the chance. She fell for you and wanted you with her while she hid out. She loves you very much, you know."

"Well . . ."

"There's no need to be modest," she said irritably. "I wouldn't be surprised if you're the only really lovable man she ever knew." She made that sound like an accusation. "Especially after a heel like Bertie."

"She stuck to him."

"I suppose he had a certain amount of animal charm. But we're not talking about Bertie." She paused and then asked sharply, as if I were being cross-examined in some kind of court, "Do you love Jeanie?"

"She's a good kid."

"That means you don't love her." The quietness I had associated with her was completely gone. Her strong face was mobile with emotion. "Then why in the world did you come with her? Didn't you realize the risk you were taking?"

"Uh-huh."

"And you don't even have the justification of being in love with her." Her mouth twisted scornfully. "You don't strike me as a man who has to go to such lengths to sleep with a pretty girl."

It was terribly important that she understand.

"It wasn't Jeanie," I said. "I mean it was, partly, but not primarily."

"I can't think of any reason except that you're out of your mind."

"That's possible."

I took out cigarettes. She shook her head when I extended the pack, then said, "All right," and extracted one. We stood close as I held a light for her. As she leaned to the match, her bunched-up hair almost brushed my face. I had never in my life wanted to do anything so much as I wanted to touch her.

I stepped back.

"Call this my private caper," I said.

She stared at me with the cigarette lax in her mouth. "Caper? You can't mean you're after the money?" She inhaled smoke. "No, of course not. You wouldn't have hung around so long. You would have made your try sooner and beat it."

"I'm not using 'caper' in the gangster idiom, meaning an organized robbery."

"Don't sneer at us!"

It struck me that at that moment she hated me.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't intend to sound supercilious. Maybe I'm naturally a stuffed shirt. That's it. I want to get out of myself. This is my caper in the accepted sense of the word."

"You mean like a frolic?" She looked as if she could have slapped me. "I see. You're slumming. You're having a fling at the seamy side of life. Then you'll go home and tell your friends what fun you had in the underworld."

"Please, Elsa. I'm trying to explain. It's not simple. I'm not clear about it myself. One definition of a caper is an irresponsible escapade. At least once in his life a man needs to be irresponsible."

"How dare you play games with our freedom?"

Abruptly she turned away. I glimpsed her bosom heaving before her back was to me. She strode to a bush a short distance away and tore furiously at berries.

I remained where I was to give her a chance to calm down. Presently I put down my pot and went to her.

She stopped picking berries when I stood behind her, but she didn't turn. I couldn't get in front of her because she was close to the bush. I said, "Elsa."

"Let us alone!" she said harshly without looking around at me. "You and your capers! Do you know what it can mean to Stan and the others? Twenty years in jail. Go away. Let us alone."

I said to the back of her head, "Look. It's been days since you tricked me with that Mary Creed trap. But you haven't told Stan. Why not?"

"I don't want your blood on his hands. Do you imagine that he and Fatso and Ronnie could afford to take the risk that you wouldn't turn them in for the reward?"

"I had no idea there was a reward."

"There generally is. Go away from here. Go back to your home, wherever it is."

"If I leave, how would you know I wouldn't head straight for the police and claim the reward?"

"I have to take that chance."

"Does my safety mean more to you than theirs? Than Stan's?"

Her back remained to me. She said nothing.

I said, "Days ago you knew I was an impostor, but you didn't tell me until a few minutes ago. You didn't tell Jeanie to get me away from here. You didn't urge me to leave. Not until now, when it had to come out. You wanted me around, didn't you?"

She made no answer by word or gesture or movement.

I looked up at the knoll. Bushes and trees blocked us from the house. This for a very small time was a world of our own. And she stood silent and motionless with her back to me, and her bare shoulders were like honey.

I kissed one of those shoulders. I pressed my mouth against its sun-warmed, intoxicating smoothness.

"No," she said. "Please."

But when I put my hands on her, she turned. The berry pot was between us, digging into me and her hair was in my face.

"Elsa," I said.

Her head tilted back. Her violet eyes swam under mine. The pot fell, slid down my leg, and landed on my shoe. I kissed her mouth.

Her fists clenched against my chest and her mouth was hard under mine. Standing beside the bush under the blazing sun, I held her, and suddenly her lips quivered and parted, and I could feel her uncoil, let herself go. She uttered a moan and brought her hands up to my cheeks, and there was the clinging of breasts and hips and thighs, the blending of desire and more than desire.

Abruptly she was fighting me, gasping, "Let me go!"

"Elsa, listen."

Panic possessed her. She tore at my arms to get them away from her. I released her.

"Let's face it," I said. "There's no doubt how we feel about each other."

She pulled erect her sagging body. "This is another reason why you must leave at once."

"No."

"Do you change your women every week?" she flung at me.

"Elsa, this is the real thing. The way you kissed me. Elsa, look at me."

She didn't look at me. She stooped for the pot, which lay on its side. Few berries had spilled out. She straightened up with her back to me and headed for fresh bushes, as if after a brief diversion it was urgent to return to berry picking.

I followed her. "We've got a lot to talk over."

"Can't you get it into your head that no good can come of this?"

"Nothing better ever happened to me."

She swung around to face me. "Your caper! Your irresponsible escapade! Well, I'm not going to be part of it."

Her contempt was like a physical assault. In a way I deserved it. But contempt was only on the surface, a shell under which she was fighting herself as well as me.

"Elsa!" I put my hands on her.

"No!" She thrust herself away. "Don't touch me."

And she moved on to still another bush, fleeing from me, fleeing from herself.

I let her alone. Both of us needed time to orient ourselves. I returned to where I had left my pot and stood watching her pick berries. No good could come of it, she had said. Probably she was right, but that couldn't change anything. For the first time in my life I understood how a woman could mean everything that had meaning to a man.

I resumed berry picking. We remained apart, but there she was in the same field, the womanliness of her in sunlight, close and at the same time far, within and beyond reach.

"I guess we have enough," she called out.

She was at the side of the field nearest the knoll. She waited there for me to come up to her.

Tonelessly she said, "Tell Jeanie you have to be gone for a few days on business and then don't come back."

"I'm not leaving."

"Because of Jeanie, I suppose." The sneer didn't come off at all; her heart wasn't in it.

"Because of you," I said.

She strode off ahead of me.

At the foot of the knoll she stopped. "Don't get it into your head to get Stan out of the way by having him arrested."

"You don't flatter me."

"I want you to know that if you do, I'll never forgive you."

She started up the knoll. When we reached the top, we saw Stan outside the house.

"Where've you been, baby?" he said. "I haven't had breakfast yet. I'm starved."

She waved her pot. "Prof and I picked blueberries. How would you like them with cream?"

"Swell."

She took my pot from me and said, "Thanks a million, Prof," and moved on to Stan.

He peered into one of the pots—as it happened, mine—and scooped out some berries and shoved them into his mouth. "Delicious," he said. "I'm a sucker for blueberries." He slipped his arm about her waist and together they continued on to the house.

I watched the husband's hand spread intimately and affectionately on his wife's hip.

Chapter Thirteen

NEXT MORNING at breakfast, which for the first time we all ate together, Stan announced that he was driving to New York.

"Time I got off my tail," he said. "Reason I couldn't go before, my car wasn't fixed till late yesterday. I'll be back tomorrow night or Thursday."

"How about me coming along?" Ronnie asked without hope.

"How about you having a brain in your head?" Stan said. "Think I'd show myself if I didn't have to? The cops got a line on Bertie and Jeanie; could be they also got a line on the rest of us. Somebody has to find out how much they know."

"What you gonna do, ask 'em?" Fatso said.

"I know who to ask, wise guy. I got connections in New York—guys who can make phone calls to the right people anywhere in the East and maybe learn a thing or two."

Ronnie indicated me with his negligible chin. "Prof's got more connections than anybody. Could be he'll be willing to scare up some inside dope for us."

The four men looked at me. The two women carefully didn't look at me.

I gave one of my shrugs. "I'm always glad to do pals a favor. But around here I'm way out of my territory. I have to ask favors myself, and for a while I'd like not to come out of cover." I smiled affably. "But of course, Stan, if it's absolutely necessary . . ."

"Thanks, Prof, but I can manage in my own small way. Anything I can do for you while I'm in the big town?"

"One thing," I said. "Don't mention to anybody I'm here. You know how it is."

"Sure thing, Prof," Stan said.

An hour later from a parlor window I watched Elsa accompany him to his car. They walked slowly arm in arm. At the car she said, "Be careful," and he said, "Don't worry, baby, I know my way around." At the car he gathered her to him and kissed her for a long time.

I turned from the window.

That house oppressed me. I had to get away from it. Perhaps permanently, if it was not too late to untangle myself. I had been up half the night trying to think it through, but I hadn't got even a start at organizing my thoughts with Jeanie sleeping beside me and the bitter awareness of Elsa in bed with her husband in the room across the hall. What was required was to get off completely by myself.

"Honey, where are you going?"

That was Jeanie before I was fifty feet from the house —Jeanie, who blandly assumed that I was irrevocably bound to her for twenty-four hours each day. Resentment was like sandpaper on my nerves as I waited for her to come up to me.

"Do I owe you an explanation for every step I take?" I said.

"You don't have to get sore."

"I'm going on a hike."

"Where to?"

"Wherever my feet take me. I'm the outdoor type. I used to be a boy scout."

"You're still a boy scout," she said tolerantly. "Will you be back for lunch?"

"I doubt it."

"I'll fix you some sandwiches."

"Look," I said testily. "I'll buy food on the way, if I can, or I'll skip a meal. All I yearn to do is get off my tail for a few hours, as Stan would put it."

I couldn't get away without kissing her good-by. She complained that the kiss was too brief and I had to try again. Then at last I was walking away from there and from her and from Elsa too.

Beyond the meadows rolling away from the knoll I

came to a dirt road and followed it. I was angling toward the mountains, but after two hours of hiking they looked no closer. They seemed to be always the same distance away, like the fulfillment of desire. They were there, but somehow out of reach.

Like Elsa?

Like Elsa if I was sensible. But hadn't I, a week ago, abandoned common sense?

Now and then I passed an isolated, rocky farm. At one I stopped off for a handout of well water from a suspicious woman who kept a snarling hound close to her side as I drank from a dipper. She told me that Stoker Hill was six miles away.

That gave me a destination. At any rate, a destination for my feet.

In midafternoon I reached Stoker Hill. I bought a container of milk and a box of doughnuts in the general store. I ate and drank on a bench outside. I walked a short distance up the highway and turned into the narrow, wooded road that led to Hank's house. I came to the spot where last Wednesday evening Stan's car had blocked the road and I had left Jeanie in my car and had walked on alone to the house where I had paused to watch a woman pump water.

Now it was Tuesday and I was again approaching the house and the woman would be there. In the intervening days, whatever I had been looking for, groping after, I had found. But having found it didn't mean that I had it.

In my hike I had made a complete circle of some sixteen miles. A man walking in circles.

The house was very quiet. Nobody was outside or in the downstairs rooms. Where could they all have gone? In the upstairs hall I heard snoring. That accounted for one person, and possibly others were also taking naps.

Jeanie wasn't in our room. I took a fresh towel from the dresser and the cake of soap from the basin and set out for the creek to wash off the dust of the country roads.

When I neared the trees that fringed the creek, I saw a man. He was off to the left of the bathing area, but turned

to it, standing motionless against a tree. His floppy straw hat and scrawny build identified him.

A woman out of sight giggled. I couldn't be sure whether it was Jeanie or Elsa.

Hank was so intent on what he was watching that he didn't hear me until I was a step or two from him. His head spun, and through his thick-lensed glasses his eyes looked startled.

A narrow lane through the trees afforded a view of the bathing hole. Elsa was on the bank and Jeanie was kneeling in the water. Neither wore a stitch of clothing.

Evidently they had come down together to wash their hair. Jeanie's was white with shampoo; Elsa was pulling pins out of hers. "Here goes," Jeanie giggled, and pushed her head down under the water. Her back arched over the surface; even at that distance I could distinguish the submerged part of her shimmering like cream in the clear, sunlit water. She came up sputtering, stood knee-deep shivering. Elsa's hair was now a silky blonde cascade over her bronzed shoulders. With languid grace she stepped to the edge of the water and tested it with her toes.

Hank whispered, "Ain't a prettier sight than pretty women bathin' naked."

For a long moment I had almost forgotten him. He was grinning widely at me with an old man's blatant shamelessness.

I could agree with him. No prettier sight—no more completely charming scene. Jeanie's slim, pert figure was no less delightful because of my familiarity with it. And the woman—the overwhelming, blood-tingling femininity of her!

"Jeanie, where did you put the shampoo?" Elsa said.

I roused myself, remembered the need for outrage, and gripped Hank's arm. "We're getting away from here," I whispered harshly.

Meekly Hank moved away with me. When we were halfway up the knoll, I released his arm.

"You're lucky it wasn't Stan who caught you," I said.

"You got me wrong, Prof. I was gonna warn 'em Ronnie's on the other side of the crik."

"Is he still there?"

"Guess so. I seen them girls go down the crik with towels and they wasn't carryin' bathing suits. Couple minutes later I seen Ronnie sneakin' off that there way where you can cross the crik and get around the trees on the other side. I ain't no dummy. If he's lookin' at 'em all the time they got clothes on, he'll look ten times as hard when they're naked. I think maybe he'll jump out at 'em or somethin' and Stan will find out and there'll be hell to pay. So I went down to warn 'em."

"You weren't doing any warning when I saw you."

"What harm's a look for an old man? But that Ronnie! No tellin' what he'd do." Hank peered anxiously at me. "Don't start nothin' with him, Prof. I don't want no trouble."

Trouble was the one thing I definitely couldn't afford.

I raised my voice. "Hey, Ronnie, I want to see you."

He didn't answer, of course. But Elsa did. "Don't come to the creek."

"I won't. This is Prof. I'm looking for Ronnie."

"I hope he isn't around," Jeanie called. "We'll be dressed in five minutes, honey."

I said to Hank, "That ought to flush him out without embarrassing the girls."

"You ain't gonna make trouble, Prof?"

"No."

Dolefully Hank shook his head. "It ain't healthy, them young bucks with nothin' to do." He went up the hill.

I sat down on the ground. In a minute or two Ronnie appeared at the creek a couple of hundred feet south of the bathing hole. There the creek wound and narrowed and came out of the trees; the bathers weren't in his view, or he in their view, as he crossed by jumping over stones. He saw me and walked uphill to me.

"You call me, Prof?"

I waited until he reached me. "I won't make anything of it this time, but don't try it again."

"What're you talking about? All I did was take a walk."

"Well, don't walk in that direction."

His popeyes didn't meet my gaze. He muttered sullenly under his breath and continued up to the house.

The five minutes turned out to be fifteen before Elsa and Jeanie came out of the woods, the strong-bodied woman and the long-limbed girl, the corn-silk hair and the light-brown hair both shiny and heavy with wetness. I rose to my feet.

"How was the hike, honey?" Jeanie said.

"All right. I need a bath."

I hoped she wouldn't greet me with a kiss. She did and clung while Elsa strolled on ahead. I cut the kiss as short as I could without actually thrusting Jeanie away from me.

These days I had to act out two false roles—that of an ardent lover as well as a gangster.

"Um, good," Jeanie commented on the kiss. "I have to run along, honey. It's my turn to cook dinner."

At last I got to the creek. The icy water was good for my body. I splashed around for some time before drying and dressing. Outside I felt clean and cool, but inside I felt neither.

I found Elsa picking daisies and black-eyed Susans on the hillside.

I said, "Do I dare hope that this is an excuse to speak to me alone?"

She straightened up. "Was Ronnie spying on us?"

"Not only Ronnie and Hank. I too. What can you expect? I admit I had trouble tearing my eyes away from you."

She didn't blush. She said with an edge to her voice, "Of course you're used to Jeanie's body."

"I hope that means you're as jealous of her as I am of Stan."

Stooping, Elsa plucked out a cluster of daisies and included them with the rest of the bouquet. "What decision did you reach on your hike?"

"You're clever."

"I went through the same thing, except that I spent most of the day in my room."

"Well?"

"There's only one answer."

"I know mine," I said. "I love you."

"You must go away."

"With you."

"No."

"Then I'm staying."

"You can't," she said.

Up on top of the knoll Fatso, his nap in his room finished, was reclining in a canvas chair. He could see us but not hear us if we kept our voices low.

I said, "I can't leave without you, and I can't keep on living with Jeanie. How do you feel when Stan makes love to you?"

"How you chatter!" She moved downhill, picking flowers on the way.

I tagged after her. "You see, you do love me."

"I didn't say so."

"You don't deny it."

We strayed over the hillside as she picked flowers.

She said angrily, "If you expect me to go off in the woods with you while I'm living with Stan, you don't know me."

"I'd think less of you if you did. And remember I'm living with Jeanie. There's an old-fashioned virtue called honesty."

"Then go home."

"I'm not that virtuous." I wished that we were unobserved so that I could touch her. "Elsa, if you make me hang around, I'll have to tell Jeanie something."

"You mustn't." She sounded frightened. "Jeanie will never forgive you."

"Neither Jeanie nor I promised each other a permanent arrangement."

"She lives from week to week. Right now she loves you very much. She could hate you just as much."

"And tell Stan who I really am, I suppose."

"Yes. And he'd have to kill you because you know too much about him."

"If I walked out on her now," I said, "wouldn't that be enough to make her hate me and tell Stan?"

The innate strength flowed out of her face. "Oh, you and your caper! Now you realize the mess you've got yourself into."

"I realize I've found you."

"Stop acting the fool. A lot of good I'll do you if you're dead."

"There must be a way."

"There isn't. And I don't want to look for it."

She started up the knoll. I didn't follow. When she passed Fatso, he raised his head and looked after her until she disappeared into the house.

I tore to shreds a black-eyed Susan.

Chapter Fourteen

A THUMP half woke me shortly after I had drifted off to sleep. Then Jeanie was shaking me.

"Something's going on in Elsa's room," she said.

In another part of the house I heard a voice speaking with a panting, incoherent quality, and whatever was being said was punctuated by odd, scraping movements. I roused completely, opening my eyes into darkness only slightly diffused by moonlight.

"It's in Elsa's room," Jeanie was saying, "but it can't be Stan with her. He couldn't drive to New York and back in one day. And there was a chair or something just knocked over. Sounds like Elsa's in trouble. You better go see, honey."

I was groping beside the bed for the flashlight when Elsa cried out. It was more like a loud gasp than a scream, like a frantic call for help stifled before it could come all the way out.

My hand located the flashlight. I snapped it on and tumbled out of bed. My pajamas were modest enough. I dashed across the hall and pushed open Elsa's door.

The glow of the kerosene lamp revealed Elsa writhing under Ronnie. His weight pinned her down on the bed. One hand was at her outrageously disordered nightgown; his other hand was clamped over her mouth.

I dropped the flashlight and seized his shoulders and yanked. He turned on his side and glared up at me with a madman's eyes. He kicked out; his shoe caught my hip glancingly. I fell on him, my hands going for his throat and finding it. He strove to sit up. I forced him back and my thumbs convulsed, digging into his windpipe and driving the breath from his throat.

He clawed at my chest. Under me he thrashed the way

Elsa had thrashed under him. I was bigger, stronger. He was helpless.

I couldn't let go. His normally protruding eyes stuck out like marbles. I knew I was going to kill him and I couldn't stop myself.

Somebody tugged at me from behind. "Let up, you hear? Let up!" And all about me there were voices shrill with agitation.

They were all in the bedroom. Fatso, wearing only pants, and Hank, still fully dressed, were on either side of me like restraining guards. Elsa was off the bed, cowering at the other side of it, her hair wild and her arms crossed over her heaving bosom. Just inside the door Jeanie stood in her rose-colored robe.

"You was trying to kill him, Prof," Fatso said in awe.

"I seen trouble comin'," Hank grumbled. "I said so all along. Now Stan . . ."

Attention shifted back to Ronnie as he climbed off the bed. His face was slack, the features falling apart; the demented eyes were now merely shifty with fear. He rubbed his neck and said nothing.

My flashlight was still lit on the floor. I picked it up and turned it off.

Elsa spoke. "Nobody is to tell Stan. Is that understood?"

She had yanked a blanket off the bed and wrapped it around herself like a toga.

"Sure we don't tell Stan," Hank agreed anxiously. "You, Ronnie, git out of my house and stay out. Nothin' but trouble from you."

"No," Elsa said. "Stan will want to know why. Let him stay, Hank. He's learned his lesson."

Hank nodded. "Guess you're right. But he makes any more trouble, I tell Stan. You hear, Ronnie?"

Ronnie said in a constricted tone, "Hell, all I—" He drew in his breath and discarded what small measure of defiance he had been calling up. You could see his anger at his fear of Stan, and perhaps now fear of me too. "I figured you wrong, Elsa," he said. "I'm sorry."

He walked out of the room.

At the door Jeanie stepped aside to let him pass. For the first time I noticed the gun in her hand.

Elsa pulled the blanket tighter about herself. "I was reading in bed when Ronnie came in. For a while he simply spoke to me and wouldn't leave when I ordered him out. Then he—well, I thought I could handle him without help, but I couldn't."

Spying on her and Jeanie bathing this afternoon had been as much as the brute maleness in him had been able to take, I thought—that and Stan's being away overnight and Elsa alone in her room, building up in him to a frenzy stronger than fear. And my act, my frantic, blind attempt to strangle him, could be explained in the same way—love or lust or whatever else you wanted to call it to explain the driving desire to possess utterly a particular woman.

Jeanie said crisply, "O.K., you guys, beat it out of here." She put a hand on my arm, the hand that wasn't holding the gun. "Go on back to bed, honey. I'll be right with you."

She remained behind with Elsa. I followed the other two men out and went to my room and lit the lamp.

My pajamas were soaked with sweat. I extended my hands and stared at them. Strong hands, but smooth and inclined to softness, hands experienced at holding a pencil to mark English compositions; but they had clung to a man's throat and would have continued to cling if Fatso and Hank hadn't interceded.

What was happening to me here? I had shocked even these men who lived by violence.

Jeanie came in. "She's all right," she told me. "Just got a bad scare." She looked curiously at me. "What came over you, honey?"

"I was trying to pull him off Elsa."

"He wasn't near her any more when you were still choking him."

I shrugged. "I was too excited to take stock of everything that was happening."

She opened a dresser drawer and shoved her gun in under some clothes. It was the small automatic pistol I had seen once before, that first night I had spent with her when she stood at the tourist-cabin window listening to the policeman outside. All along she had continued to keep it close at hand.

She stretched and yawned. "Good thing she's not going to tell Stan. The worst thing is bad blood in a hideout. Stan would kill anybody that went near Elsa."

I had nothing at all to say.

Chapter Fifteen

HANK AND I WERE digesting our lunch on the bench under the maple, the coolest spot anywhere in or out of the house. Fatso was washing dishes in the kitchen. Ronnie had missed breakfast entirely and had shown himself briefly for lunch, sulking through the meal, disappearing again the instant he had gulped down his coffee.

"Actin' like what happened last night was everybody's fault but his," Hank commented. "But you gave 'im a lesson, Prof. You scared 'im good."

"I hope so," I said.

Elsa and Jeanie came out of the house together, walking slowly.

For the first time in the week since my arrival I saw Elsa in a dress and shoes and heels. Obviously she was going somewhere.

"Size twelve," Jeanie was telling her. "I like bright colors. Like yellow."

"Let me add it to my list." Elsa took paper and pencil from her handbag and jotted down a note. Then she left Jeanie and moved toward us.

That dress of hers was gingham with huge blue and green and purple checks. It was tight at the waist and flaring at the skirt. The neckline was square and deep in both front and back. I was afraid my quivering, gnawing desire might show in my eyes; I looked down at her approaching black raffia shoes.

"Hank, I'm going shopping," she said. "May I use your jeep?"

"Well, now," Hank said unhappily. "Women drivers . . . "

That was my opening and I jumped into it. "I've been

thinking of getting a haircut. How about both of us going in my car?"

"Why, thanks, Prof." Elsa said.

"I'll be ready as soon as I change my shirt." I started toward the house and there was Jeanie at the entrance, looking at me with that half-puzzled expression I had noticed on her face last night after the rumpus with Ronnie.

"You don't need no haircut," she stated.

"How about letting me decide?"

"Sure, honey, go ahead." Her manner of generously granting permission irritated me no end. "Do you need money?"

"I've enough for haircuts, thanks," I snapped, and swept by her.

On the way up the stairs I felt suddenly contrite. Without stint she gave me everything she possessed, her body, her devotion, her money. I had never asked her to, but I had accepted. At the least, I could spare her my bad temper, which I knew was induced by an uneasy conscience. But I didn't go back and say to her the easy, meaningless words that would bring an affectionate smile to her lips. That would be too much. In our room I changed into my last fresh shirt.

Elsa was waiting for me in my car. We drove in silence until we were halfway up the dirt road.

"Well, we're alone together," I said. "That's what you wanted."

"Did I?"

"The normal thing would have been to ask Hank if you could borrow the jeep before you got dressed up. There was a good chance he would refuse. But you knew I would snatch at the chance to go with you. You worked it the same way Monday afternoon to get me to go berry picking with you. I'm not complaining, of course. I'm glad you feel that way."

She said, "This can't go on. Last night . . ."

"Don't worry about Ronnie."

"I'm worried about you. You men! You all frighten

me. I thought you were so different from these—these others, but last night you were ready to kill another man because he wanted me."

"I love you."

"I know what love means. Like Ronnie last night. That's all you want."

"You don't believe that, Elsa."

"Does it matter what I believe? Stan will be back tonight or tomorrow. Suppose he finds out in New York that you can't be Prof Glow?"

We had reached the highway. I stared at it stretching out before us.

"We don't have to stop at Concord," I said. "We can keep going."

"You mean keep running."

"Isn't that what you've been urging me to do?"

"Alone you'll have a chance," she said. "Perhaps I'll be able to keep him from going after you. If we go together, nothing will stop him."

She turned her face away to look at the skimming countryside. Her hair was a corn-silk sphere, pulled back in a charming loop over the nape of her neck and caught with a broad velvet ribbon. My yearning for her was like a sickness.

The head of the dirt road along which I had hiked yesterday appeared. I slowed the car and swung it off the highway.

"Where are you going?" she demanded.

"You'll see."

She sat against the door, seeming to cower there as we drove through flat, unpopulated country. Yesterday I had learned that this road was seldom used. Presently I rolled the car in among trees some fifty feet off the road. She uttered a small sound, a kind of wordless plea. I pulled up the hand brake and cut the engine.

Elsa was half turned to me, her torso rigid, her cheeks taut, as if waiting an attack against which there was no defense. I put my hand on her arm below the elbow-length sleeve.

"No," she said thinly. "Please don't make me."

I shifted along the seat and slipped my right arm around her and my left hand lifted her face. Her eyes closed. She trembled when I kissed her. It was as if resistance trembled out of her, and suddenly her body lost its stiffness and her mouth opened.

"Now I'm sure," I said. "You love me."

"Oh, God, I can't help it."

She brought her mouth back to mine.

After a while she moaned, "Darling, I can't stop you. But not now. Please don't make me here and now."

She was right—not here and now. Not here, snatching crudely at passion in a parked car like high-school neckers. Not yet, when tonight we would both have to return to beds that we shared but not with each other. The beginning had to be clean and honest in time, and complete and dignified in place.

So we just held each other, and gradually our passion turned tender and somewhat sad. A pickup farm truck approached. She stirred uneasily, then subsided again when it passed.

"I don't even know your real name," she said.

"Larry Knight."

"Larry," she repeated, and then said, "My darling Larry," and then, "Is that short for Lawrence?"

"Lawrence Bennett, to give you the works. I don't quite know how to go about asking a married woman to become Mrs. Lawrence Bennett Knight, but that's what I'm doing."

"You're not serious."

"I've never been more serious in my life. A divorce is possible."

I felt Elsa withdraw into herself.

"Nothing is possible for us," she said woodenly.

"Love . . ." I said, and her laugh interrupted me.

Her laughter was like weeping. She was at the edge of hysteria. I ran my lips over her face. She sagged in my embrace, listless with the overriding sense of defeat. I lit cigarettes for both of us. We smoked holding hands.

"We'd better get on to Concord," she said.

I drove back to the highway. My right hand reached for her to regain the feel of her.

"Perhaps you underestimate Stan as a human being," I argued. "He may be civilized. If you tell him you no longer love him and ask for a divorce . . ."

She said tiredly, "It's your right to know this. Stan and I aren't married."

"What?" I took my eyes off the road; her profile was static. "Then that part is no problem."

"It changes nothing."

"But he has no claim on you."

"He'd go after us and find us." Elsa twisted her torso around to me. "Can't I make you understand? Stan is not like you, like your kind of people. He lives by violence and reacts with violence. And Jeanie will tell him who you really are and where you live. She cares as much for you as he cares for me, and she's his kind. She'd no more forgive us than he would. But that's not all. You know too much. You'd be a menace to him and Jeanie and the others. For that alone he'd have to go after us. How long do you imagine we'd be together?"

"This is a big country."

"He'll find us. What kind of life will it be for us, trembling at every shadow?"

"Then I'll fight back. I could—" I gulped back the rest.

"What were you going to say?"

"Nothing."

"You were going to say that you'd turn him in to the police. I told you the other day that if you did I'd never forgive you. Stan has been good to me. He loves me and trusts me. Could you turn in Jeanie?"

"Never." My hands tightened on the wheel. "All right, I'll talk to him man to man."

"Don't be an idiot."

"You're worth any risk."

"I want you alive, not dead."

"The way you raise obstacles, we'll never have each other."

"I don't raise them. They're there. I said nothing is possible for us." She clutched my arm. "Please, Larry, for my sake as well as yours, go away."

I stared at the road. "You know," I said, "I've never been a stubborn guy. But I've never loved like this. I'm not particularly brave either, I suppose. I'm scared of Stan, but not as scared as I am of losing you."

"Be reasonable."

"You be reasonable," I said. "Think it all the way through. You keep telling me how much Jeanie would hate me if I walked out on her."

"I meant if we walked out together."

"How would it be different in the end if I went off alone? Would she let me walk out on her and not tell Stan? You answer that. In many ways you know her better than I do."

"You may be right," she said miserably.

"A woman scorned," I said. "And Jeanie scorned would be a vindictive fury. I have a notion about her. I think she was—" I broke off.

"She was what?"

"Never mind. What I'm getting at is this: I won't be any safer without you than with you."

"Why didn't you stay home where you belong?" she said bitterly. "Then we both wouldn't have got into this trap."

"And we would never have met."

There was a long silence. I took my gaze off the road and saw that her violet eyes were filled with tears.

I patted her knee and both her hands closed over my right hand. "I love you," she said, the first time she had put it into words. "No good can come of it, but I love you so terribly."

The rest of the way I drove with only one hand on the wheel.

When we reached Concord, Elsa said it would require an hour to shop for herself and Jeanie. I had my hair cut and was back at the car in half the time.

Aimlessly I strolled along the street. A haberdashery

lured me. Yesterday Jeanie had made up a bundle of our personal laundry to take to town, but it wouldn't be back until the end of the week, and almost the last of my available clothes were on my body. I considered the few dollars in my wallet and decided I could afford three pairs of socks and a pair of underwear shorts. Once inside, I fell for the salesman's spiel; in addition to socks and shorts, I came out with a pair of washable slacks and a sports shirt. I left another four dollars in a drugstore for a carton of cigarettes and eight paper-backed novels.

There were packages in the car. Elsa had dropped them off and had gone to accumulate more. I waited on the sidewalk.

Presently she was coming down the street, picking her way through the afternoon crowd, and she wore her femininity like an aura. Always it was as if I were seeing her for the first time—a recurring experience of surprise and yearning that was almost more than I could bear. I stepped on my cigarette and went forward to relieve her of her packages.

"I'm dying of thirst," she said when I had deposited the packages in the car.

"How about beer?"

"Beer sounds wonderful."

We sat at a cool table. She took out her paper and pencil and did elementary arithmetic.

"How much did you spend on Jeanie's things?" I asked.

"Just a moment." She added a column of figures. "Seventeen dollars and three cents."

The beer arrived. I drank half of it and said, "I ought to pay it, but I have less than fourteen dollars left. I can't cash a check and I can't send for money without using my real name."

She curled both hands around her glass and lifted it to her mouth.

"Jeanie is paying my board as well as her own," I went on. "She covered my poker losses. This morning she slipped me another two hundred dollars to give Hank for

the coming week. That's a thousand dollars I've already taken from her. What kind of man does that make me?"

"You can pay her back sometime."

"That's what I keep telling myself and her, but it doesn't change much. The thing is, I'm living on her and with her, and on top of that I love another woman." I scowled into my beer. "Like a male prostitute."

"I know." Elsa looked away and her voice was very low. "Monday night when we went to bed I told Stan I had a headache. Yesterday I was glad when he said he would be away overnight. Probably he'll be back tonight. If not tonight, tomorrow night. I can't keep telling him I have a headache."

"This can't go on."

"I've been telling you it can't," she said.

"Then we mustn't go back to Hank's."

"I must, and you've convinced me that you must too. I didn't know about the thousand dollars. Jeanie's generous, but now she believes she's bought and paid for you and is entitled to her money's worth. We're in the same boat, darling. It's leaking, but if we try to get out we're sure to drown."

"Then what do we do?"

"I don't know," she said.

We finished our beers and returned to the car.

When we were out of the city, I said, "Elsa, tell me about yourself."

"I'm living in sin with a gangster," she replied wryly. "That's practically my whole story."

"It can't be. You're educated."

"In other words, you want to know how I fell so low."

"Don't put words into my mouth."

"I haven't risen from anything," she said. "The men in my family were no better than the men at Hank's, and in some ways worse. We lived in Jersey City, in the slums, and our slums can match any. My father was a drunk who couldn't hold a job and my two brothers were hoodlums before they were fourteen. I was the youngest, the only girl. I remember my mother as a tragic, worn woman, but

I remember her dimly, as in a dream dreamed long ago, because she worked too hard to have time for me. She died when I was nine, just a few months before my eldest brother was sent to reform school. My other brother was smarter; he kept out of jail till he was nineteen. So you see, I haven't changed my environment."

"But the year at college . . ."

"Oh, I tried," she said. "Perhaps not hard enough later, but when I was young I tried. I was good at school and a great reader. My father was unhappy because I insisted on going through high school. I was old enough to work. I did work, after school in a five-and-dime store and all day Saturdays and during vacations. We were always desperately poor. My brothers were gone; they never contributed to the house anyway. Just my father and I in that rotten, dirty little flat, and he drank up what little he earned and it was up to me to keep us going—to go to school and work and keep house and never have time or strength for fun."

She paused, and I thought of my own youth—the neat frame house, kind and loving parents, the carefree existence of George and Marjorie and I. And I said compassionately, "No youth."

"Almost none. I remember I was always dead tired when I went to bed. But I had to become a schoolteacher. That was the height of respectability to me. I got through high school with high marks in spite of everything, and then I was at teachers' college, living away from home at last, for the first time in a clean, decent room I shared with two other girls. It was a state school, so there was little tuition to pay, but I had to work every minute I could to pay for my room and board. Besides supporting myself, every now and then I had to send my father money to keep him from going completely to pot. Then a month after the second year of school started, I had an appendicitis attack and had to have an operation. Sickness is the worst thing that can happen to the very poor. It destroys them. I was a charity patient, but even so it took what little money I had. I left the hospital too weak

to work and I was missing school and I had hardly enough money for food and nobody to turn to and terribly alone. And I married a man named John Reynolds."

A horn honked. I was in no hurry to end the drive: I dawdled along at thirty an hour. I pulled over to let a ten-wheel truck pass.

"We were married two days after we met," Elsa said. "John was quite handsome and had a lot of charm. I don't think I loved him, really, even at the very beginning. I liked him, and for the first time in my life somebody wanted to shelter and protect me. He was an appliance salesman. We agreed that I would go back to school, but it didn't work out. A week after we were married John told me he had quit his job because he was offered a better one in a Pittsburgh department store as a buyer. We moved to Pittsburgh. He got the job, but it turned out to be only as a clerk. Soon he had a fight with the department head and was fired. He said he was glad because a friend in Cleveland had a better job waiting for him. So we moved to Cleveland. There was no friend or job. For the next three years we were constantly on the move. John couldn't keep a job any more than my father could, but for a different reason. He couldn't get along with any kind of boss. But he got along too well with women. I began to find out that wherever we moved there was sure to be some other woman."

"I don't believe it," I said. "How could any man want another woman while he had you?"

She smiled wanly. "Thank you for the compliment. John was restless; he always had to have something new, and that included women. Perhaps sooner or later I would have left him anyway. When I learned he wasn't even loyal to me, that was too much. We were living in New York at the time. I rented a furnished room uptown and got an office job. I was very much alone until I met Stan Crocker."

"How long ago was that?"

"Five years ago last April. I was having dinner in a cafeteria and was trying to make up my mind whether

to take in a movie or go right home to read. Stan sat down at my table. We started to talk, and after a while he said he had two tickets to a show and asked me to go with him. He seemed rather old for me, but very pleasant, and I was lonely and I said yes. He took me to a night club after the show. I had a lovely time. I told him I was married, but not living with my husband. He merely nodded. When he took me home, he didn't try to paw me. After that we went out together once or twice a week. I think he was the first and only man who was ever really kind to me. Always considerate, a gentleman. I suppose you can't understand how a man like Stan . . ."

"I understand, all right," I said. "For a week now I've seen you and Stan together. There are two Stans—one the minor gang leader and the other the man who loves you. You insist he's kind to you, but you fear him. You're convinced that if you go away with me, Stan, the gentle lover, will give way to the other Stan."

"Yes." After a pause she said, "When I first met Stan, he told me he was retired and looking around for a business. He had plenty of money. Probably I wouldn't have gone out with him if I'd known the truth then; I'd had enough professional criminals in my own family. He seemed so respectable. In June he asked me to divorce John and marry him. I said I would, and that was the first time he as much as kissed me. He had a nice furnished apartment in Morningside Heights, near Columbia University, and I moved in with him. I called myself Mrs. Crocker. And Stan actually looked for John; he was very anxious to make it legal. But John had disappeared. I didn't care so much. I had a good home of my own at last. I felt secure. And when I found out the truth about Stan, I wasn't so shocked."

On our right was the Stoker Hill store. I thought of passing the road to Hank's place and driving aimlessly for another hour, but it wouldn't do for us to be away together too long.

"After all, criminals in my family were nothing new," she was saying. "I wouldn't have started going with one,

but now he was my man and I was happy with him. Or as happy as I had ever been. So I went on and on with Stan, year after year, through crimes and capers and hideouts, and here I am."

"What about your husband? Did you find him and divorce him?"

"Stan found him. He has friends everywhere and had them search for John. Last year he learned John was living in Tampa, Florida. Stan flew down there and found John married to a rich widow. Stan must have frightened him. John showed him papers to prove that he had never been legally married to me. It turned out he'd already had a wife when he'd married me and had never taken the trouble to divorce her, or to divorce me when he'd married a third time."

"No wonder you thought Stan pretty wonderful after John."

We were on the dirt road. I took it very slowly.

Elsa said, "Stan flew back from Florida and wanted us to be married right away. I put him off. I said there was no hurry. I said a legal document wouldn't make any difference. You see, when I was actually faced with marriage to Stan, I couldn't go through with it. Because this wasn't the life I wanted and Stan wasn't the man I loved. I'd never really loved any man until . . ."

"Until me," I said.

She covered my hand with hers. "I love you so much I can give you up if it means your safety. Except for one thing. Stan mustn't be hurt."

"He'd be hurt by losing you."

"I know. But I can't let you have him put in jail. I can't let you do that to him."

"You have my word."

We were now close to the house. She released my hand and shifted away from me. Sedately apart, we approached the house.

Chapter Sixteen

JEANIE whispered, "Honey, are you asleep?"

"No."

"The way you toss, you keep waking me."

"I'm sorry. If you'll stay on your side of the bed . . ."

"Your side is my side. What time is it?"

"I don't know. Around two or three."

"Well, I'm wide awake now." In the darkness her breathing quickened. "Oh, honey!"

"You're shoving me off the bed."

Giggling, she shifted to the middle of the bed. I remained at the edge, my arm dangling over the side.

"What's the matter?" she complained.

"Nothing."

"You been acting funny lately. Like I'm poison."

"Look, Jeanie. It's the middle of the night and I'm trying to fall asleep."

"That's all I get from you. At night you're tired. In the morning you're still tired. What happened to you all of a sudden?"

"Maybe you overestimated my capacity. If you expected a stud bull, you've thrown away your money on me."

There was only the darkness then, no stirring, no audible breathing, no contact, but I could sense her stretched out taut as a bowstring inches from me.

Presently I said, "I didn't mean it, Jeanie."

"That's the nastiest thing anybody ever said to me. Bertie never hurt me so much, even when he smacked me."

"Did he beat you up?"

"I don't want to talk about him."

"Would you prefer me to beat you?"

"You wouldn't. I figured you as a real sweet man. You'd

never hit a girl. But you do say things that hurt worse."

"So Bertie used to hit you," I said.

"Well, he was quick with his hands."

"And you stood for it?"

"He had a bad temper that went off like a shot. He'd give me a slap and then be sorry right away. Like you are when you say mean things to me. The only time he really socked me hard—"

She stopped speaking.

"What happened?"

"There was a party in New York last June."

"That must have been just before or after you and Bertie came up here to plan the Knoxville caper."

"Just before. There was a guy at the party. All I did was let him kiss me and Bertie saw it. When we got home, he worked me over. I was black and blue."

"And you let him get away with it?"

"I let you get away with the way you speak to me. Men are men. You got to take them like they are."

"You once told me that you stopped caring for Bertie because he was mean to you. Was that what you meant, that beating?"

"Yeah, I guess so." She was again all over me, and again I was being half forced off the bed. "Honey, that's why I fell for you so hard. You were so different. A sweet, good-looking man. But now you act like you don't care for me no more."

"What I tried to say is that I'm no superman."

"It's been days, honey. Turn around to me." Her voice became triumphant. "You see!"

The trap, I thought. While I remained in this house, I had to share her bed; while I shared her bed, I had to make love to her. But this was not love or even the hearty lust it had been at the beginning, only the mechanics of love; and afterward I lay back dull and listless, thinking emptily of the woman in the room across the hall as Jeanie lay contented on my shoulder.

A car pulled up to the house. Both Jeanie and I roused.

"Stan's back," she said nervously.

The people he had spoken to in New York might know Prof Glow.

She slipped out of the other side of the bed. Her bare feet made no sound on the floor. At the window moonlight touched her creamy slenderness.

"Stan," she whispered to me, and moved from the window, losing substance and shape.

Downstairs the entrance door opened and closed. I heard Jeanie fumble in darkness. The flashlight went on and I saw her putting on her robe. The stairs creaked under Stan's ascent. Jeanie went out into the hall, leaving the door open, and I lay listening to their muted conversation.

Most of what they said was incoherent. Once Stan raised his voice as if in anger. "Nobody has any idea. If I get my hands on the rat who fingered Bertie . . ." The voices lowered.

Jeanie returned. Just before she closed the door, I saw Stan behind a flashlight enter the bedroom across the hall where Elsa waited for him.

Jeanie dropped off her robe and crawled in beside me. "It's O.K., honey. Stan kept his promise. He didn't mention to anybody that Prof Glow is hiding out here."

"Did he learn anything?"

"Far as he could find out, the only one the cops tied in with the caper was Bertie. But he ain't sure; Stan got no guarantee that was straight dope. Of course, they're still looking for me."

"Evidently he didn't learn who fingered Bertie."

"No." She snuggled. "You should be able to sleep good now."

I lay wondering if Elsa would again tell Stan that she had a headache.

Chapter Seventeen

THEY came out of the storm. Abruptly, above the driving fury of the rain, fists pounded heavily on the front door.

The downpour was the culmination of a hot, sticky day. It had taken most of the afternoon to gather, bringing dusk and then night early, and still there had been a pause, an hour-long hush interspersed by distant rumbling before the sky had opened up with everything it had.

We were all in the parlor. I was reading one of the novels I had bought yesterday; at the opposite end of the room Elsa, her legs curled under her on the sofa, read another. Between us Stan and Ronnie huddled contemplatively over the chessboard on a small table, while on the mission oak table, directly under the hanging kerosene lamp, Jeanie and Fatso played five-hundred rummy. Hank sat on the floor growling at the ancient wall clock he had taken apart and was trying to reassemble.

A cozy scene, seven people snugly sheltered from a storm raging and crashing against the solid old house; and for this little while, at least, the lusts and fevers and terrors of living had loosened their hold on us. Until fists battered on the door, and suddenly the room was filled with gagging tension.

Thunder growled, faded. There was a moment of silence. Every head was raised; every pair of eyes mirrored taut nerves. The pounding resumed, and a man's voice cried, "Hey, open up!"

This was the way they would expect it, I thought, this their waking and sleeping nightmare: fists on a door accompanied by the voice of the law commanding, "Open

up!" This, I could fully understand for the first time, was what it meant to be a criminal.

And Fatso put it into a single word. "Cops!" he whispered.

The door flew open. It hadn't been locked; only the turning of the knob had been required.

"Anybody in?" a woman called.

There was suddenly sound in the room, a kind of collective sigh of relief. Stan and Hank stood up.

"Hello, there," the woman said.

The parlor light had drawn her from the dark center hall. She stood in the doorway, small and frail, dripping wet. Behind her, in shadow, loomed a man.

"Yes?" Stan said.

"Isn't this Hank Armstrong's place?" she said. "I believe that's the name. They told us it must be at the end of this road."

Her accent was so painfully Bostonian as to be almost comic to a native New Yorker.

"So what?" Stan said.

"Then it is the right place." Uncertainly she looked around at the intently watching people in the room. "They told us at the gas station—you know, on the highway—they told us you take tourists."

Evidently that was the word Hank had passed around Stoker Hill to explain his visitors. Now he was stuck with it. Hank looked at Stan to handle the situation.

"We're filled up," Stan said.

"Oh, dear. We have to sleep somewhere. And this terrible storm . . ."

"Sorry, no room," Stan said.

She turned her head to the shadow behind her. "What are we going to do, Fletch?"

The shadow uttered incoherent sound and swayed. A hand appeared over her head and clutched the doorjamb.

"I'm afraid he's practically out on his feet," the woman informed us gravely, and stepped into the full light of the room.

She was small, precisely and delicately formed, somewhere in her thirties. Her round little face might have been pretty, but she had lost partial control of her facial muscles and her pale eyes were bleary and her hair straggled wetly down one cheek. Her drenched blouse clung like skin and her skirt dripped water to the floor.

"What's the matter with the guy?" Hank asked.

"Blotto," she said. "High as a kite."

She wasn't anywhere near sober herself.

"This isn't the only tourist place," Stan told her.

"But they're full and we can't look any farther. We got a flat tire on this road and I drove on it and cut it to pieces."

"You have a spare, haven't you?"

"But I detest driving at night and there's this terrible storm and Fletch can't possibly drive in his condition. I told him we should limit ourselves strictly to that thermos of Martinis. He shouldn't have bought that bottle of rye. And on top of that drinking in the roadhouse." Her lips quivered; her bleary eyes filled with tears. "Please! I don't care where you put us up."

Stan gnawed his lower lip. I doubted that she had roused his sympathy, but she had presented him with a dilemma. They might remember faces, particularly Jeanie's, whose picture was being broadcast. But it might be as risky to cause talk, even suspicion, in the neighborhood if word got around that two people, both soaked to the skin and one of them practically out on his feet, were turned away at night in a violent storm.

"Suppose we change your tire for you?" Stan suggested on a note of desperation.

"Even so . . ." She made a hopeless gesture. "We can't go looking any longer tonight. We simply can't. I'll die if I have to drive another inch. And Fletch—"

As if this last mention of his name were a signal, the man lurched through the doorway and into the light. He was a head taller than the woman and a good twenty years older. His bald pate glistened wetly. His flamboyant loafer jacket and white flannels hung soggily from

a tall frame that had most of its weight around the middle.

He hunched, clutching his stomach, and said something that rattled in his throat.

"What is it, dear?" the woman said.

He got it out thickly. "Th' john. Wha's th' john?"

Hank told him, "It's outside, back of the—" Then he saw how green the man's face was turning and yelped, "Hey, not on my floor! Git outside!"

The man floundered into the hall. Nervously Hank hurried after him. We heard him throw open the door and a moment later close it. We heard the man retch in the rain.

"That should make him feel better," the woman said. She sank into a chair and passed her hand across her mouth and looked as if she would also need the outdoors. She recovered and turned her gaze pleadingly to Stan. "You see, you can't possibly put us out."

Stan gave in. He had no alternative. "Where can they sleep?" he asked Hank, who had returned to the parlor.

"I got an army cot I can put in here, and the woman's so little she can fit on the sofa."

"Oh, I'm grateful," the woman said. "Truly I am." She spread a smile around. "I haven't introduced myself, have I? We're Mr. and Mrs. Darrow. And now will somebody introduce you kind people?"

Nobody cared to name our names. Elsa diverted Mrs. Darrow's interest in the social amenities by saying, "Don't you think you ought to get your husband indoors?"

"Oh, he's wet anyway." She tittered. "Will somebody please let me have a cigarette?"

Ronnie sprang forward. As he held the light, he stared popeyed down at her trim little figure with the unabashed predatory expression he had for any attractive woman.

Stan had Jeanie by the arm and was taking her out to the hall. I followed with a flashlight.

"They haven't had a good look at you yet," he whispered. "Stay in your room till they're gone."

"Just because a couple drunks—"

"Do like I say!"

"All right, all right." By the light from the parlor she saw me. "Come with me, honey."

I was lighting the lamp in our room when I heard commotion downstairs. I said, "I'll see what's up," and left. If possible, I didn't propose to return until she was fast asleep.

Ronnie and Fatso were carrying Fletch into the house. Hank held a lantern high. Elsa and Mrs. Darrow hovered in the parlor doorway and Stan stood at the foot of the stairs.

"Hank found him passed out cold outside," Stan told me disgustedly. "My God, what a pain!"

Elsa said, "Bring him in here," and Ronnie and Fatso bore the limp man into the parlor.

"Put 'im on the floor!" Hank yelled. "He'll git my sofa all wet."

They eased him down on the floor, beside the table. He lay on his back, breathing raggedly through his open mouth. He was not a pretty sight.

"This is the best thing that could have happened to him," his wife said placidly. "He'll sleep it off."

Elsa was considerably more concerned. "We can't leave him here soaked to the skin. Have you dry clothes in the car?"

"There is a week-end bag in the trunk. I should like to change." Mrs. Darrow looked speculatively at the men in the room. Her smile lighted on Ronnie. "Would it be too much to ask you to bring our bag?"

"Sure thing," Ronnie said with unusual amiability.

I picked up the novel I had been reading and went with it into the kitchen.

Somewhere in the house there was whispering. Sitting at the big, round kitchen table, I looked up from the book and listened. The whispering seemed to come from everywhere, like the voices of conscience.

I rubbed my tired eyes. They were good eyes; they

could read endlessly without glasses, but they weren t used to kerosene light. I turned the wick up higher and the lamp started to smoke. I turned it down a bit.

Whispers in an old New England house at midnight. People or ghosts or rats. People, in this case—no doubt the two drunken refugees from the storm in the parlor. The man named Fletch must have awakened, and those would be his and his wife's voices.

All the rest of the household was asleep by now—or anyway, up in their rooms. And in the kitchen I read on and on in a trivial so-called historical novel that didn't particularly interest me, reading to delay going up to the bed where Jeanie slept, reading because it fogged my brain against remembering too acutely how Stan had possessively slipped an arm about Elsa as they had gone upstairs together an hour ago.

The whispering died. The storm had passed by. I sat alone in utter silence. I pushed the book aside and propped my elbows on the table and rested my head in my hands. In that position I dozed off.

"Hello."

I looked up. Fletch stood in the kitchen, tall and pot-bellied and bald, his face lax and pasty. He had put on pants over his pajamas and he hadn't taken the trouble to lace his shoes.

"How do you feel?" I said.

"Rotten." His voice was fuzzy. Sleep had done him good, but he had a great deal to sleep off. He asked, "Are you a guest?"

"Yes."

"What happened to me?"

"You passed out. One of the men helped your wife undress you and put you to bed on the cot."

"Where's she sleeping?"

"I suppose you missed her in the darkness. Her bed was made on the sofa in the same room."

"A light was left on. She's not in the room." His dead-white hands closed over the back of a kitchen chair. "But I just woke up," he said in a rather odd note of eagerness.

"She must've stepped out for a minute. Where's the john?"

"The best we can offer is an outhouse. You go through that door and follow the path a short distance to the right."

"I guess that's where she is. Thanks."

He started across the kitchen to the back door. He wobbled.

"You'll need a flashlight," I said. "Here's mine."

"Thanks." He accepted it from me. He took a few more unsteady steps and stopped. "But she would have had to come through this kitchen, and you say she didn't."

Anxiously he waited for me to reassure him.

I did the best I could. "She must have gone by way of the front door and around the house."

"Did you hear her?"

I saw no reason to tell him about the whispering voices. I said, "I was absorbed in my book."

"Yes. Well . . ." He seemed reluctant to leave, as if afraid he wouldn't find her outside either. "Thanks," he said for the third time, and shambled out in unlaced shoes.

My mouth was dry and my eyes were pasty. I went out to the pump. The sky was clearing and moonlight came through. With my left hand I pumped water into my right hand and washed my face. I filled the dipper and drank. There was no better water anywhere.

Somebody tittered. The barn showed no light through the doorless entrance, but I knew they were in there, whispering and tittering like children on a lark. They were the ones I had heard a short time ago, their whispers entering the kitchen through the breezeway. Probably they had whisky with them, which would be why they weren't quieter, but whisky would by no means be the only reason they were in the barn.

I returned to the house and looked into the parlor. A small lamp was on, turned down low. Nobody was in the room, of course. The table had been pushed against the

wall to make space for the canvas cot. The sheets and pillow were rumpled; the blankets were on the floor, where Fletch had dragged them along with him when he had groggily arisen. The improvised bed on the sofa was as neat and undisturbed as when Hank had made it up for the woman.

She must already have spent quite a while in the barn. And now her husband was outside looking for her. He knew his wife, poor man.

I told myself that it was not up to me to do anything about it or to stop whatever might happen. Let the drunk watch over his drunken wife. And who was I to pass judgment on anybody who surreptitiously made love?

Then the shouting started. For a long moment it was just noise, loud and bitter recrimination. Suddenly the woman shrieked, shrill and pulsating, her voice breaking off as if for breath and rising again to a single keening note.

Upstairs a door slammed open. A flashlight beam knifed down the stairs, covering me as I stood in the hall.

"What's up, Prof?" Stan said.

"They're in the barn."

"That dame?"

"Who else? I think her husband found her with somebody."

By then he was down the stairs, his light wavering as he tied the cord of his dressing gown. It was silk, neat and conservative like everything he wore, tailored to his broad shoulders. Together we hurried to the barn through the breezeway.

Stan's flashlight swept around and found Fletch lying flat on his back. His eyes were wide open, not quite glassy. One hand flapped on the floor like the tail of a feeble fish out of water. A thin stream of blood trickled down his chin.

The light moved a little and focused on Ronnie. I hadn't been able to imagine anybody else. Stripped to the waist, he stood moodily sucking the knuckles of his

right hand. Evidently he had cracked them against the man's jaw.

Mrs. Darrow crouched on a blanket. Ronnie must have brought it from his room and spread it out on the barn floor. Its purpose was obvious. She had changed into a dry summery dress that was awry on her small frame and had buttons open. Our arrival had lowered her shrieks and moans. She swayed, holding her temple, and blood seeped through her fingers.

And the reek of whisky pervaded the barn, not so much from the collective breaths of those three—though that helped—as from the bottle that had been knocked over, its contents soaking into the blanket.

Fletch had broken up quite a party. He had gone for his wife instead of the man, probably using as a club the flashlight I had lent him. After he had struck her with it, Ronnie had knocked him down.

Ronnie said, "This here heel—"

"Shut up!" Stan said, and looked behind him.

The others were coming through the breezeway—Elsa first, then Hank and Fatso. It was like two nights ago, when Ronnie also had been the cause of bringing us tumbling out of our beds. But that other time Stan hadn't been here.

Stan gave crisp orders. "Baby, take the dame in the house and fix up her head. Hank and Fatso, carry the guy to his bed."

Fletch started to his feet. "I—I—" he sobbed, and fell against Fatso, who caught him. Fatso supported him as Hank led the way with a kerosene lantern. After them went Elsa with an arm about the moaning, unsteady woman. And nobody said a word, and in the receding and uncertain light it was like a procession of the wounded down the breezeway.

Then we were alone in the barn, Stan and Ronnie and I. Stan's light remained remorselessly on Ronnie, who continued to suck his knuckles.

"Leave us alone, Prof," Stan said.

I entered the breezeway and stopped and turned.

Ronnie said hoarsely, "Listen, Stan, all I did—"

"All you did was maybe bring the cops down on us. Suppose he's hurt bad, or the dame's hurt. Suppose he makes a complaint anyway and the cops investigate. You stuck all our necks out."

"She wanted it. I didn't have to drag her in here. Hell, I ain't a monk or something. It's all right for you. You got a woman in your—"

"Shut up!"

Stan transferred his flashlight to his left hand and with his right fist hit Ronnie in the face. Ronnie took a stumbling, cowering step backward and put up his hands. Stan hit him low, deliberately driving his fist considerably below the belt. Ronnie screamed and Stan hit him again in the face, always with his right fist.

Ronnie didn't attempt to fight back. He didn't dare. This was his gang leader ruthlessly keeping one of his men in line. And when Ronnie, whimpering and writhing, sank to the floor, Stan started to kick him with cold and methodical ferocity.

Sick to my stomach, I passed through the breezeway. Through the kitchen door I saw Mrs. Darrow seated at the round table with the side of her head on her arms as Elsa bandaged her head.

Elsa, the housekeeper, the mother, the ministering angel.

I moved on to the hall. Jeanie's voice came down from the darkness at the head of the stairs.

"Who's down there? For God's sake, will somebody tell me what's going on?"

Dutifully she was remaining out of sight of the Darrows. I went up the stairs to her and told her.

"That all?" Jeanie's hands went to me. "When I heard all that yelling and running, I was scared something happened to you because you weren't in the room."

I said, "I'm going down again in case I'm needed."

"You'll be right up, honey?"

"Soon," I told her, because I couldn't tell her anything else.

In the parlor Fletch sat huddled on the cot, and he was sobbing. Fatso and Hank stood awkwardly, listening to him in embarrassment and contempt.

"It happens like clockwork," he was saying brokenly. "Every few months. I give her everything she wants. But every few months a man. Like clockwork." He wrung his hands, womanlike. "I never struck her before. I don't know what came over me tonight. I heard voices and went in there and I saw . . . I saw . . ." His body shook.

"Can't blame her," Fatso whispered to me with a leer. "An old buzzard like him." Abruptly his face sobered. "But Ronnie should've had more sense. Suppose this guy yells copper?"

Stan entered, cool and unruffled. There were flecks of blood on his right knuckles where they had split, but unlike Ronnie, he disdained to suck them.

Fletch made the effort to lift his head. "How is she?"

"A skin wound." Stan planted his feet apart. "You got a nerve. We take you in out of the storm, and what do you do? The two of you cause a scene, get me and my guests up in the middle of the night. I ought to call the police."

"You mustn't!" Fletch said frantically. "It will get in the papers. The Boston papers. Our friends will read it."

"Then take her the hell out of here. The storm's over. We'll change your tire while you get dressed."

"But—but where will we sleep?"

"I don't give a damn," Stan said. "You have ten minutes. Say fifteen. If you're not out of here by then, I'll call the police and say a wild man's here who tried to beat his wife's brains out because he caught her rolling in the barn with one of the guests."

"We'll go at once," Fletch stood up, wobbling.

"Swell," Stan said. "We'll all agree to keep quiet about what happened."

"Thank you," Fletch said with humble gratitude.

Stan turned his head to me and gave me a wink. Somehow that wink made me shudder.

Chapter Eighteen

DURING the night Ronnie disappeared.

Elsa was the only one who had gone near him after the beating. When she had finished bandaging Mrs. Darrow's temple, she had been drawn to the barn by his groans. Blood running from his nose had made him look in worse shape than he probably was. Though this was the man who two nights ago had tried to assault her, she had brought him a basin of water. He had cursed her and knocked over the basin.

"Don't bother with him," Stan had told her. "He's lucky I let him off so easy."

In the morning, as soon as Ronnie's absence was discovered, Stan jumped into his car and drove to the highway on the chance that Ronnie was walking along the dirt road. He wasn't.

When Stan returned, he and Fatso and Hank took Ronnie's room apart. Jeanie and Elsa and I watched from the hall. His bed hadn't been slept in, but there were droplets of blood on the stairs and on the floor of his room, evidence that, with his nose still bleeding, he had dragged himself up here after the Darrows had departed and we were all asleep. As far as could be determined, he had taken no clothes except perhaps a shirt. But his money was gone and so was his gun.

"With all that cash in his pocket, he'll head for liquor and dames," Stan said. "That means a city. Concord or Manchester or all the way to Boston. Could be even New York. Depends on where the first lift he got on the highway dropped him off."

"Good riddance," Hank commented. But he sounded dubious. If he was rid of a troublemaker, he had also lost a boarder who was worth a hundred dollars a week.

Stan said, "The trouble is, it isn't good riddance. I wish it was. I've known too many guys were sent up because they had somebody in their outfit who was a blabber-mouth."

"It don't make sense for Ronnie to talk," Fatso argued. "He's a three-time loser. He'd get maybe life himself."

"A mug full of booze doesn't know he's not making sense," Stan said. "I don't say he'll go to the cops. He'll drink like crazy, and in a gin mill or with a dame his tongue will loosen up why he's sore as hell at me. Some stoolie will hear him and find out enough to go after the reward. It happens all the time. Maybe there's not a chance in a hundred we can catch up to him, but we'll do what we can near home. Fatso and Hank, you cover every gin mill in Manchester. I'll take Concord."

"Do we bring gats?" Fatso asked.

"Take one in your car, but don't carry it. If you find him, show it to make him come back. But watch him. He's got his and he'll be mean drunk."

I wasn't asked to participate in the search and I didn't offer my services. The three men drove off, Stan in the Kaiser and Hank and Fatso in the jeep.

Jeanie and I were the only ones who ate breakfast that morning. Elsa went back to her room. Her sanctuary, I thought.

"Stan's losing his grip," Jeanie complained as we ate. "What did he gain by beating Ronnie up last night? These men just like to use their hands every chance they get. If he knew Ronnie was so unreliable, why did he ring him in on the caper in the first place? Bertie didn't want Ronnie. He argued with Stan. Stan said Ronnie was the best man he knew for that kind of job, so Bertie gave in. But he told me he was worried about Ronnie. Bertie was always very careful. Looked at all the angles. Better than being sorry later, like Stan."

I said, "There must have been one angle Bertie overlooked. The one that killed him."

"Well, those are the breaks."

After breakfast I suggested to Jeanie that perhaps Ron-

nie hadn't had the strength to go more than a short distance and was lying near the house in pain or unconscious. I said I would go and see. I was like a small boy who couldn't leave the house without subterfuge. I wandered a quarter of a mile into the woods and sat down on a tree stump and lit a cigarette.

I wondered if Elsa, closed in her room, lying open-eyed on her bed or sitting in the armchair, was thinking the same thing as I—that if Ronnie in some way or another brought the police down on this house, our problem would be solved. Stan, the one person in the world between us, would then be out of the way in jail.

That must be occurring to her. And she must be wanting it and at the same time not wanting it because Stan was the first and only man who had ever been good to her.

I hadn't yet had a chance to be good to her, and perhaps in the long run I would be bad for her. It was becoming clearer and clearer that the best thing I could do for her was to go away from her.

I couldn't.

Let the police come. Elsa herself wouldn't be arrested. I wasn't a lawyer and I knew nothing about how the police mentality functioned, but I doubted that they would press an accessory charge against her. And probably not against Jeanie either, though she was in deeper trouble because she had run away from a shooting with the loot. Their interest would be in Stan and Fatso and Ronnie, the actual bandits, and in Hank, the paid keeper of the hideout. Why should I care if they paid for their crimes?

I wouldn't care. I could desire it, but not bring it about through any act of mine. I had given Elsa my word, and what would I gain if she hated me for breaking it? All I could do was sit on a tree stump and smoke cigarettes.

At noon I heard a car return. The dirt road was not far from where I sat; through trees I glimpsed the jeep. I remained where I was. Half an hour later I saw Stan's car. I started back to the house.

They were all in the kitchen, famished and edgy. Elsa was bringing a huge bowl of spaghetti and meat balls to the table and Jeanie was mixing dressing into a salad.

"No luck?" I asked, though the answer was obvious.

"Like lookin' for a needle in a haystack," Hank grunted.

I sat down. We ate.

Fatso said, "You know what I think? I think he'll go on a bat and buy himself a dame and wake up tomorrow and come back. He ain't no dumby. He knows there's no percentage for him anyplace else."

"Could be." Stan rolled spaghetti on his fork. "But we move out of here if he's not back by tomorrow."

Ronnie said, "I'm back now."

He stepped into the kitchen, and he held chest-high a black, hideous gun.

I had been pouring myself a glass of milk. The glass filled and overflowed before I managed to right the bottle.

For a long moment there was complete lack of sound in that room. Then Stan said, "Put it down, Ronnie."

Ronnie laughed. He was drunk, of course. He couldn't have gone far from the house, probably only to the nearest place where he could buy whisky and brood, and now he was back with his gun covering all of us at the round table and his popeyes as demented as they had been the other night when I had pulled him off Elsa.

"You don't give me no more orders," he said.

He had trouble speaking because one side of his mouth was swollen. All the blood hadn't been washed off his upper lip; flakes of it adhered like rust.

My hand remained fixed around the neck of the milk bottle as if glued there. I sat nearest to where Ronnie stood. Twisted around in my chair, I couldn't see the others. But I could hear their breathing, the sucking of air into lungs as constricted as mine.

"Nobody slaps me around," Ronnie went on. "Don't do this and don't do that. Don't drink and don't touch dames." The gun quivered with the violence of his emo-

tion. "Who the hell are you, Stan? That dame last night, she was willing. But you—you got a hot-looking dame all the time in your bed. I have a party with one who wants it and you slap me around like I was a kid."

Stan said matter-of-factly, "If I wasn't around to wipe your nose, you'd be in stir or dead like Bertie. Put away the gat and sit down and eat."

"You want it standing or sitting?" Ronnie said. "You want the slug to smash in your face or tear up your guts? It's all the same to me."

The gun moved out from his chest.

I glanced over my shoulder. Stan sat broad-shouldered and rigid, his hands spread flat on the table. He and Fatso had taken guns with them on the futile search, but they wouldn't have brought them to the table. There was no room for guns in the light clothing they wore. Only Ronnie had one now, and it made him the master of life and death.

"What'll it get you?" Stan said. Not pleading, not arguing, an overtone of contempt in his voice.

A woman whimpered. Whether Jeanie or Elsa I didn't know. My gaze was on Stan. Everybody else at the table was a blur, and Stan had only courage and contempt to bring against Ronnie.

"You worry about what it will get you," Ronnie flung at him. He seemed enraged by Stan's failure to squirm and beg for mercy. "A slug for you," he said, "and then one for Prof."

There were enough bullets in that gun to satisfy all his hates. I was slated to be one of his victims because I had nearly strangled him.

But that couldn't be all of it. That, like the beating by Stan, was the surface impetus. His urge to murder went deeper, all the way to the roots of his lust for Elsa. He wanted Stan to die because Stan was the man who slept with her. He would include me because I had dragged him off her. And while he was shooting, while he was filling the room with death, would there also be a bullet for Elsa? Possibly.

"Ronnie, use your head." Fatso had found his voice. "Anybody burns a big man like Prof, he can't find a hole big enough to hide in."

Ronnie didn't hear him. He was transported to a world of death with himself as the avenging angel. His teeth drew over his swollen lip.

I had not released the milk bottle.

"You first, Stan," Ronnie said.

I threw the milk bottle at Ronnie's face.

Instinctively his hand holding the gun jerked up to protect his face. The bottle struck his elbow, splattering milk.

It fell on me because I had left my chair in a dive for his legs. I hit him above the knees and he crashed against the wall.

He would have been able to kill me, shooting down at me, if Stan hadn't been on him an instant later. Stan hit him and he sagged and then Fatso was all over him too. Somebody stepped on my hand.

"O.K., Prof, I got his rod," Stan panted.

I climbed up to my feet. Ronnie sat on the floor. I couldn't see his face because Fatso was in the way.

"You sure done it, Prof," Hank chortled.

Elsa's face was buried in her hands. Jeanie chewed her fingers.

Suddenly Ronnie screamed. I whirled around to see Stan shoot Ronnie in the head.

Chapter Nineteen

THEY waited until darkness to bury him. From a parlor window I watched them bring the dead man out of the barn, where he had lain all afternoon and evening behind the woodpile. He was now tied in a blanket.

I wondered if it were the same blanket he had spread out for Mrs. Darrow and himself last night.

Stan led the way with a battery lantern. Hank and Fatso followed. The long, narrow burden dimly visible between them in the moonlight swayed from side to side. The three living men and the dead man disappeared over the crest of the knoll.

During the day Hank and Fatso had gone off with pick and shovel to dig the grave. Where they were burying him I did not know, and they preferred not to have me know. I had done my share, for which Stan had expressed gratitude. I had saved his life along with my own. I had disarmed a man and set him up for cold-blooded execution.

Jeanie was with me in the parlor. Of everybody in that household, she had been the least disturbed during the interminable hours after the killing. I turned from the window. She sat on the sofa with her feet tucked girlishly under her, and her small, naïve mouth formed a circle through which she blew cigarette smoke.

"You're not thinking of doing anything foolish, honey?" she said.

"I no longer know what's foolish and what isn't."

"You're an accessory all the way. You're an accessory to the caper because you brought the dough here, and you're an accessory to the killing. The law won't make any difference between you and the others."

"I realize that."

Jeanie smiled. "Just so you know the score, honey."

Sometime later Elsa appeared. Tonelessly she asked for a cigarette, and it struck me that those were the only words I had heard her utter all day. In fact, I had seen her only twice that day, briefly, when we had searched the house for Ronnie in the morning and during that lunch which had abruptly ended with death. Immediately after the shooting she had gone up to her room, and she hadn't come down for the dinner that Jeanie had haphazardly thrown together.

I handed Elsa cigarettes and a match book. She lit up and sat and joined us in our silence. She was as indrawn, as alone with herself as if she had remained in her room, that quietness of hers wrapped about her like a mantle.

The impossible situation had become still more impossible. I told myself that soon now something would have to snap.

We heard the men return, speaking in the properly muted tones of those who had just come from a funeral. Stan entered the house alone. Hank and Fatso were probably going on to the barn to put away the shovels.

Stan entered the parlor and stood broad and squat in checked worsted pants and the inevitable white dress shirt, without necktie but with sleeves buttoned. "So that's over," he said. He moved on to Elsa's chair. "You feeling all right now, baby?" he asked, patting her shoulder.

Elsa shrank away from him.

Stan's jaw muscles ridged. "What's eating you?"

"Don't touch me!" she burst out.

She leaped to her feet and ran out of the room. Stan started to follow, then halted and stood listening to her dash up the stairs.

When the sounds of her flight died, he turned back to the room with a very small smile. "She's upset," he explained as if apologizing for her. "Sensitive. She'll get over it." He looked at me. "You haven't said a word since it happened, Prof. You been sitting in here most of the time."

"Any objection?" I said.

"You look kind of upset. Like Elsa."

"I can't afford to have my name mixed up in this kind of thing."

"Prof," Stan said with that half-smile, "I'm not a big shot like you, but right here I'm top man. I didn't invite you. You asked to stay. O.K. I have to protect myself and my people. You're only hiding out from a committee—a subpoena, you said. It would be little skin off your back to be caught. But we—" He opened his hand and closed it. "I couldn't let him live, could I? The guy was off his rocker. Maybe he'd get another gat and try again. Maybe he'd get so crazy sore he'd turn state's evidence. You never can tell when they're like that. I couldn't take a chance."

"All right," I said.

"Sure. I'm not worrying about you, Prof. You'll keep your lip buttoned. Your name will be mud in the rackets if you step out of line."

"All right," I said.

Stan nodded, the smile broadening, and turned to Jeanie. "Ronnie's dough was in his pants. We'll split it the same way we split the other dough. Two shares for me. Hank claims he should cut in for a share because it happened in his house and he helped cover up."

Jeanie bristled. "My God, ain't he getting enough in board? Don't give him a red cent extra."

I walked out of there.

Somebody with a flashlight was ascending the stairs ahead of me. The light reversed to guide me up, and behind the light Fatso said, "I been meaning to talk to you, Prof."

"Yes?"

"You remember I told you Hi Globeman said maybe you had a spot for me in your organization."

"I'd rather not discuss business now."

Fatso held my arm. "It'll take only a minute, Prof. This here ain't no life. Like what happened today. You got plenty of jobs to give out. What say, Prof?"

"I've been away from the West Coast. I don't know what's doing there."

"But if you did have a spot for me . . ."

"Yes, yes, I'll keep you in mind." His persistence rasped my raw nerves. "Good night," I said, dismissing him.

"Good-night, Prof. You'll think it over, huh?"

I closed the door of my room and lit the lamp and lay down fully clothed on the bed.

Too soon Jeanie joined me. She yawned, looked at her wrist watch, said. "I didn't know it was so late," and shed all of her clothes. She turned the lamp up higher. Standing at the dresser, she began to comb her hair.

"Stop letting it bother you, honey," she said into the mirror.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

"Ronnie wasn't anybody I'd cry over, and he had it coming. Like Stan said, what else was there to do?"

"Tell me one thing. Before Stan shot Ronnie, did he know that Ronnie had attacked Elsa?"

"Stan still don't know. We didn't tell him right off, so everybody's scared to tell him now. He'd get sore at us for holding out."

"So he hadn't that justification for shooting Ronnie."

"He had enough."

"What would Stan do if he found out you hadn't spilled everything about Ronnie—beat you all up?"

"Oh, Stan's all right," she said, "if you play along with him."

And if you didn't, I thought, he beat you up or killed you.

Lying on the bed with my face turned toward her, I watched the rhythmic stroking of the brush. Jeanie with the light-brown hair, who had given me what there was to give of herself, and within days her youthful, slender, ardent nakedness had become hateful to me.

I said, "I'm leaving here, Jeanie."

Because remaining under this roof was intolerable. Perhaps Jeanie would understand that murder had made it so and would release me. And it wouldn't mean aban-

doning Elsa for good. In a few weeks or months the situation would change, or somehow be made to change, and Elsa would join me in New York.

Jeanie was facing me now, looking down at me on the bed. "You're staying," she stated flatly.

"Look. There's a limit to what you can expect me to take. Murder is too much."

"You don't care for me no more." It was an accusation.

I hedged. "I didn't say that. But I don't belong here."

"You're staying. I have to stay and I want you with me."

"Is that an order?" I said.

"You know what Stan would do if he found out who you are. Knowing all about the caper was bad, but now you saw him knock off Ronnie."

"So it is an order," I said. "Blackmail."

"I don't care what you call it, honey. I got you and I'm going to keep you."

Placidly she resumed brushing her hair.

I was normally an early riser, and earlier still these last few days when I didn't care to linger in bed with Jeanie. But next morning, at considerably after ten o'clock, she was up and dressed while I was still under the blanket.

"What's the matter, honey? Don't you feel good?" she said.

That was an idea. "Not very."

She pressed her lips against my brow. "You got no fever. What hurts you?"

"Nothing in particular."

She nodded understandingly. "Nerves, that's all. A rest in bed will do you good. Want me to bring you up breakfast?"

"No."

She kissed me and went. I curled up.

I was in bed for the same reason that Elsa was increasingly confining herself to her room—feeble attempts to burrow ourselves away from crushing reality.

I dozed and woke and dozed. The second time I woke Jeanie was in the room saying, "How're you feeling now?"

"Rotten," I lied.

"It's after two. You want to come down to eat or should I bring you up something?"

"I'm not hungry," I said, and turned my back.

She hovered over me, worrying about me, the way my mother used to and more recently my sister Marjorie.

"I'm fine as long as I'm let alone," I said testily, and buried my face in the pillow.

But after she was gone, bed was no longer a comfort and an escape. It was, after all, necessary to have food and drink; more than that, I was assaulted by restlessness. I lay listening to the movement and voices inside the house and out—somebody humming an unfamiliar tune, a car arriving, the creak of the pump handle, Fatso calling, "Hey, where's Stan?"

I rolled out of bed and soaked my face in the basin. I needed a shave, but I didn't shave. I put on the slacks and sport shirt I had bought in Concord, neither any longer clean, and I left the room.

Hank was passing through the downstairs hall. When he saw me descend the stairs, he shouted, "He's comin', Stan," and continued down the hall.

I turned into the parlor. The two other men and the two women were in there, all turned to the door, all watching me.

Elsa stood closest, and her eyes were stricken. All of of her seemed to have crumpled, face and body, her bronzed body in black shorts and black strapless elastic halter no longer exuding that impression of indomitable strength, her seminakedness making her look pathetically defenseless.

Stan, resting the backs of his thighs against the table, had eyes of ice in a face of rugged rock.

I told myself that he had somehow found out about Elsa and me. Then I looked at Jeanie at the other end of the room and I knew it couldn't be that. She would have been enraged; instead she was terrified.

Was it the other thing, then?

A step sounded behind me. I glanced around. Hank had returned with his rifle.

"Come in," Stan ordered me crisply.

I moved past Elsa. Fatso stood against a window, and for the first time since I'd known him his face wasn't friendly.

Hank and his rifle followed me into the parlor.

Stan said, "Fatso, tell him."

"I just got back from Stoker Hill," Fatso said. "I put through a long-distance call to Hi Globeman in Frisco on the pay phone. Last night you said you didn't know if you had a spot open for me in your organization." He paused, dominated by bitterness. "That's when I thought you was Prof Glow. I figured Hi being there, he'd know if there was a spot for me; and if he said yes and I told you, I figured you'd say O.K., I could have it. I spoke to Hi. He said I was nuts. He said Prof Glow's in Los Angeles. He said he saw Prof Glow night before last."

There was nothing I could say.

Elsa was gone. I hadn't noticed her leave while Fatso had been speaking. She must be upstairs now, having shut herself in her room, while whatever was to happen to me would happen.

She couldn't have helped me by staying, but the fact was that she had run out on me.

Jeanie said hoarsely, "I told you, Stan. He helped me get away from the cops. You don't have to worry about him. Honest."

Stan turned his head to her. "You crazy little idiot! He's a lot more dangerous to us than Ronnie ever was, and after what he witnessed yesterday . . ." He pushed himself away from the table. "I ought to bash your face in, Jeanie. I think I will—later."

But first he would take care of me. He had said that I was more dangerous than Ronnie—and he had shot Ronnie in the head. There were plenty of bullets here.

And guns to fit them, and suddenly Elsa was back with one of those guns.

I saw the frown start to grow on Stan's face an instant before I heard Elsa's voice say tautly, "Don't move, Hank, I have you covered." I turned, hearing Stan say, "What the hell's that for?" and there she was holding the muzzle of an automatic pistol two or three feet from the small of Hank's back.

Stan's gun, probably. She had gone up to their room to fetch it when she had realized there was no other hope. She had removed her shoes to descend the stairs and cross the hall in barefooted silence so that she could slip behind Hank without attracting attention.

Standing there, she reminded me a little of Ronnie yesterday in the kitchen doorway—except that she had come to bring life, not death. But she had to be ready to kill in order to preserve life. And she said from deep in her throat, "Hank, I'll shoot if you don't put that rifle down. I'll shoot!"

"What's the idea?" Stan demanded.

"You're going to let him go," she said.

Stan started toward her, slowly, saying woodenly, "Why should you care, baby?"

Elsa retreated two jerky, barefooted steps and checked herself, her bare shoulders hunched as if pulled down by the tremendous burden she was carrying. Her gun wasn't as big as Ronnie's had been, but it overflowed her brown hand.

"I'll shoot!" she warned shrilly. And as Stan came on, starting to detour around Hank, who hardly dared breathe, she had to say what would convince him. "Because I love him. I'll shoot you to have the man I love."

Stan's face went gray.

"It's not true," he whispered.

"It's true. I love him. I won't let you hurt him. And you know I can shoot straight. You taught me, Stan."

Stan stood looking at her. They all looked at her the way they had looked at Ronnie in the kitchen, as fearful now of a woman in love as yesterday they had been of a demented killer. Experimentally I put out a hand to Hank's rifle.

Hank's eyes swung away from her and to me, but I could see in them that he wasn't going to try to keep the rifle from me. Not when a woman in love was behind him with a pistol she knew how to use. So I got the rifle, and for a while at least Elsa and I were on top.

If Stan had doubts that Elsa would use her gun, he had none that I would use the rifle. You could actually watch him shrivel, though I didn't think our guns had as much to do with it as what Elsa had told him.

I said, "We're taking all of you as far as my car. Get moving."

Our guns herded them out of the house and toward the three parked cars. They moved morosely and without words. Elsa and I walked together behind them.

"You have to come with me now," I told her.

"I know."

"Go back for your clothes."

"It's too much risk," she said. "What about their cars?"

"Do you know what the distributor cap is?"

"Yes."

"Pull out the wires," I said.

We had reached the cars. I kept those four covered while Elsa lifted the hood of the Kaiser and then the jeep and messed up their distributor wires. They stood as if huddled together, silent, Fatso's and Hank's faces simply ciphers, Jeanie's sullen, Stan's gray and crumpled except for his eyes. Death for me and for Elsa too was in his eyes.

When Elsa finished, she covered them with the pistol while I started the engine of my car.

Jeanie found her voice then. "You lousy, stinking two-timer! You and that rotten bitch!"

Then Elsa was with me in my car and we were driving away from there.

Chapter Twenty

WE HEADED NORTH into the White Mountains. We kept away from main roads.

Whenever a car was behind us, Elsa would take a good look at it through the rear window.

"You're conjuring up ghosts," I scolded her. "Even if they repaired the damage to their cars in ten minutes, they'd have no idea which direction we took and which roads. By now there've been so many crossroads that twenty cars couldn't find us, let alone two."

"I know," Elsa said, "but I can't help it."

Deep in the mountains, I pulled up at a filling station that was much like the one in Virginia at which I had stopped less than two weeks ago and had noticed a patch of yellow dress among trees. This station was also off by itself and had hand pumps and a tired wooden shack, but the man who came out to fill my tank was on the youngish side.

As he cranked, he kept glancing at Elsa in the car. Her arms were crossed over her bosom, covering the strapless halter, and from outside the car she looked as if she might be wearing nothing. He must have known it wasn't possible, but evidently he enjoyed the mental picture. She moved her arms and the strip of black cloth was revealed. All the same, he kept staring at her.

Every man would, I thought. I didn't mind. Let them look at her and envy me.

The gas took three dollars out of my wallet.

"We'll have to buy clothes for you," I told her when we were back on the road.

"I've been thinking of it, but I didn't want to stop till we were far enough away. Is there a town near here?"

"A speck on the map some dozen miles away. They'll

have to be mighty inexpensive clothes. I have eleven dollars and change left. We'll have to hold onto enough for food and lodging. I've no idea what we'll use for money tomorrow."

"Oh, I took care of that." She lifted a corner of the floor-board mat and straightened up with several bills in her hand. "Five twenties," she said. "They should see us through for a while."

"When did you put them there?"

"After we came back from the shopping trip to Concord. You remember you told me you had very little money left."

"So even then you intended to go away with me?"

"I had no idea what might happen. The money was for an emergency. You can't run very far without money."

I took the five twenties from her because I had pockets and she didn't. I was still living on a woman, I thought—now another woman. But I didn't say it and I didn't feel bad about it. This time it was different, because Elsa was different. I didn't even have to assure myself that the money was merely a loan. From now on everything each of us had we would have and share together.

I said, "I could kiss you."

"Then why don't you, darling?"

I pulled the car off the road and took her in my arms. That kiss was the first we could give wholly, the first that was not snatched surreptitiously in bad conscience and fear.

She started to weep softly. I held her cheek to my chest and stroked her hair.

"It'll work out," I said.

"It can't. You'll never be able to go home. He'll learn your address from Jeanie. Then he'll have your house covered."

"Never is a long time."

"He won't give up."

My fingers trailed from her hair to her cheeks to her shoulder to her body, tenderly learning the marvelous feel of her.

I said, "Then we have no choice. We'll have to turn him in."

"How will that help?"

"He can't get at us from behind bars."

"But there will be time before he's arrested, if they ever do catch him. Don't you see, darling? We'll have to step out into the open to make a charge against him. He'll hear of it, read it in the papers. He'll learn where we are."

"The police will give us protection."

"But can they protect us day and night, always, every minute of our lives? And he'll try. It's no longer so much that you can be a witness against him. It's mostly now that we went off together. He'll take any risk."

"Once he's behind bars . . ."

"Do you really imagine a jail cell will stop him? You don't know how they operate. I do. Haven't you heard of hired killers? Stan can hire one as easily from inside prison as outside. Many an outside killing is arranged from prison." She gripped me with a kind of frenzy. "Hold me, darling. We'll have at least a little while together."

"You're exaggerating," I said. "He's worried chiefly over his own sweet neck, and at this moment he's frantically headed for a new hideout. Chances are he won't stop until he's clear across the country."

"Perhaps," she murmured, not believing it. She sat up and glanced around at the empty, hilly countryside as if expecting ghosts. "Let's go, darling."

We had parked too long. When we reached the village, it was after six o'clock and the small business section was closed down tight. I studied the map. Within the next hour we passed through two more communities that had stores, but only drugstores and eating places were open.

Our inability to buy any sort of garment for her presented us with two problems. The first was eating. I hadn't had a bite all day; I was famished. In certain free-wheeling resort areas she might have got away with going almost anywhere in her irreducible minimum of clothing,

but we doubted that they were as broad-minded around here.

But that was minor. I bought sandwiches and soda pop in a lunchroom and brought them out to the car, where we made our meal.

The second problem was how to spend the night in a bed under a roof. It had no solution. We entertained ourselves somewhat wryly with the picture of our car pulling up to a tourist place and she stepping out in those two bits of black cloth, wearing not even shoes. If I were to give her my sport shirt, that would leave me stripped to the waist, and we would still make a highly unconventional pair. I suggested that we say our clothes had been stolen, but Elsa didn't want to run the probable chance of being refused lodging.

"Besides, it will make us more conspicuous," she said. "Stan will ask if anybody has seen two people in a New York car and the woman wearing only—"

"Look," I cut in. "There's not one chance in a thousand that he'll be anywhere near."

"I'd rather not take any more chance than we have to. And I don't want to scandalize people and be embarrassed."

"That's different. There I'm with you."

"We won't be the first people who've slept in a car." Her head moved in that haunted and by now almost instinctive gesture of looking for pursuers. "Keep driving at least till dark," she said.

At twilight we crossed the Connecticut River into northern Vermont. Soon after I wanted to stop for the night, but she said, "Not yet, please," and I humored her.

I wondered how a man she claimed had been so good to her could frighten her so thoroughly. But I knew the answer. I had seen him coldly shoot down a man who had been disarmed, and I had seen his eyes after she had told him she loved me.

When night was complete and we were in the middle of what appeared to be nowhere, I rolled the car off the

road, inched forward a good hundred yards over rugged terrain, and swung to the other side of a solitary pine. I cut the engine and the lights and lost Elsa in total darkness.

"Where are the guns?" her voice asked.

"Under the seat. Elsa, stop worrying. Even if by chance he comes this way, he can't see us from the road."

"I know," she said, and suddenly she was against me, tight and hard.

I felt her cold flesh. "Here, take my shirt."

"Then you'll freeze."

"Believe it or not, I'm hardy. I'll shut this window. If it gets colder, I'll turn on the heater for a few minutes."

I helped her on with the shirt. When she settled back against me, I found her chin with my hand and tilted it toward me.

Her lips remained long against mine, and they tasted of sadness.

After a while she said, "Darling, we can't make love tonight."

"Oh," I said.

"It's not that. It's just—I love you so much, but I feel chilled and frightened all the way through."

"All right," I said. "Anyway, a car's still not the place."

"I wouldn't care, darling. I wouldn't care anywhere with you. If you want to very much here and now, I will."

"I want to when you want to."

"I will, darling. Oh, I will. But tonight I'm so—oh, I don't know."

"I understand," I said, and pulled my hand away.

"Oh, no. I need you to hold me."

I held her.

We slept in fits and starts, adjusting ourselves as best we could to the confines of the car seat and the intrusion of the steering wheel. Whenever in sleep we shifted apart to ease our bones, we would half wake and reach for each other as if we needed constant reassurance that we were together.

Once my groping hands found nothing. Instantly I was wide awake, frantic beyond reason. Gray dawn covered the empty field.

"Elsa!"

"Good morning, darling."

She appeared around the pine tree behind which we had parked. My shirt dangled over her arm.

I devoured with my eyes the bronzed womanliness of her. Mine forever and the hell with Stan.

As I put on the shirt, I said, "The first thing we do is buy you a dress."

"Have you forgotten that today is Sunday?"

"So it is. Maybe somewhere somebody is trying to do business in clothes in spite of Sunday."

Nobody was, as far as we could find. If we had been in the market for antique furniture or maple sugar, we could have bought all we wanted on the road, and in the larger towns an occasionally open drugstore or newspaper store could have stocked us up on newspapers and bathing caps and alarm clocks. But nowhere was there anything for sale to put on a woman's back.

For another day Elsa would be confined to the car.

"I really don't mind," she said. "We'd keep driving anyway, and I have you with me all the time, and eating in the car is like a picnic."

We drove clear across Vermont to Burlington. Our choice of direction at that point was limited. Before us was Lake Champlain and not far north was Canada. We had to turn south. At the tip of Lake Champlain we crossed into New York State over a toll bridge, where the man who collected the toll looked twice at Elsa's very bare shoulders and down through the car window at more revealed flesh. We drove down the west shore of Lake George. Everybody was out on that warm Sunday. We drifted along roads crowded with tourists, yet we were alone together among hordes, our car a kind of prison that we did not wholly resent.

We had made an early breakfast in the car of pound-cake and cookies and a bottle of milk and a box of cher-

ries. At the edge of the teeming resort town of Lake George, which appeared to consist almost wholly of elaborate tourist cabins, I stopped at a lunch wagon for a container of hot coffee and four hamburger sandwiches to take out. It didn't occur to me to have a real meal at the counter without her.

She was laughing when I approached the car—the first time I had seen her laugh in a long time.

"What's so funny?" I demanded.

"What a couple of tramps we look like! You needing a shave badly and your clothes soiled and crumpled and me half naked. Soon you'll be ashamed to leave the car too."

"Wait until you see me cleaned up tomorrow. You might even fall in love with me."

"Darling, I'd love you in rags and a beard to your knees."

We ate and drank as we drove. I shook off traffic by turning northeast into the magnificent mountain lake country of the Adirondacks. As we bore deeper into the state park, other cars virtually disappeared. A roadside food stand popped up at an isolated village, and there, standing at the outdoor counter, we at last ate outside the car. The evening we spent on the shore of a crescent-shaped lake, nameless to us, and watched boats far out on the water.

If we had had a blanket, we would have spent the night on the ground. With twilight a chilly breeze came up. We returned to the car. We sat together, hardly touching each other and wordless, but closer than we had ever been, together in that lost little world we had made for ourselves and that we desperately wished could last forever. We watched the sun drop over the lake and night gather, and I could no longer see her.

I said, "As soon as we're settled tomorrow, we'll get a marriage license."

"No."

"Are you turning me down?"

She didn't answer. I felt her shiver beside me.

"Take my shirt," I said. "If that's not enough, I'll turn on the car heater."

I removed my shirt, but she didn't take it when I handed it to her. Her arms went around me. She whispered, "Oh, my darling!" and I felt her breasts against my chest.

So that was our nuptial coach, that cramped car seat which after all had its own perfection after the many hours it had been our home. Here then was the blending, the absorbing, the culmination, the marriage.

And later I said, "Whether you like it or not, you're my wife already."

"Yes, that way."

"Then why not legally too?"

"Because it doesn't matter."

"It matters very much to me."

"Please," she said. "Let's not argue now."

I picked my shirt off the floorboard and put it on her. The night grew colder. I started the engine and turned on the heater and within a few minutes we were steeped in coziness. I removed only one hand from her to kill the engine, then put the hand back. We slept.

Chapter Twenty-one

In the morning we hunted up a numbered road and followed it into a neat little valley town named Honey Point. It had a bank and a post office and four filling stations and one of every kind of store except a dress store. Elsa suggested I try the variety store, which had its windows crammed with toys and tools and magazines. I was dubious, but inside I found a rack devoted to what the girl who waited on me called ladies' garments.

I bought a size-twelve chocolate-colored cotton dress with roses climbing all over it and the cheapest size-seven shoes in the place.

Elsa couldn't quite restrain a gasp when she unwrapped the package in the car. If she didn't care for my taste, she didn't say so. Sitting in the car, she wriggled on the dress over what she already wore and slipped her feet into the shoes. At last she was released from the car. We crossed the road to a restaurant and ate a thumping breakfast.

I stroked my four-day beard. "Now that you have clothes on you, I feel by contrast like a bum you brought in here for a handout. I noticed a barbershop down the road."

"If you'll let me have some money, I'll shop for odds and ends meanwhile."

I handed her one of her twenty-dollar bills. "Your hundred may have to last us quite a while."

"Don't worry. You won't find me an extravagant"—there was the least hesitation—"woman."

"The noun is wife. That's what you're going to be. My wife."

She folded the twenty-dollar bill into a small square and stood up. "I'll meet you at the car," she said.

I had my shave. On the way back to the car, I passed a log cabin that housed a real-estate agent. I went in. Ten minutes later I came out with a name and driving directions on a slip of paper.

Elsa hadn't lost time changing out of the dress I had bought her. She was waiting for me in a high-necked polo shirt and a flaring gingham skirt and different shoes.

I said, "After all, that was the first clothing I ever bought for a woman. To me you look delicious in anything."

"Thank you, darling. Where will we go now?"

"We stop going, I hope. I got a line on a comparatively inexpensive bungalow for rent some ten miles from here."

The name on the slip of paper was Steelman. We found it printed on an R.F.D. mailbox. An elderly, weather-beaten man sat on the porch of a one-story white clapboard house. He didn't rise as we walked up to the porch from the car.

Rocking unceasingly in a creaking rocker, he said that the bungalow was a quarter of a mile from the road; that his son had built it for himself and wife, but had found it too cramped when the baby was born and had bought a house close to town; that he himself lived here all alone since his wife had died last winter; that seeing the summer was partly over we could have the bungalow for only three hundred dollars, in advance, till Labor Day.

"The agent told me two-fifty," I said.

Mr. Steelman looked us over. "It's got running water and everything's electric—hot water, stove, refrigerator. Three hundred dollars."

"Will you take a check?"

"Where's your bank?"

"New York City."

"Nope," he said. "Cash."

"Look. Will you take fifty in cash and the rest in check? You'll know in a few days if the check has cleared and you'll have your fifty, so you can't lose anything."

"Let's see your cash."

Elsa spoke up. "Don't you think we ought to look at the bungalow first?"

She had something there. The three of us drove the quarter mile in my car over what was the vaguest indication of road. Under two stately elms the bungalow stood alone and white and tiny. We followed Mr. Steelman in. The interior walls were unfinished, the studs bare. There was one room, pretty small, and part of it was given over to the compact kitchen and its definitely secondhand equipment. As for the bathroom, a man my size could just about expand his chest in it with the door closed. But it was all very clean.

Elsa nodded to me and I said we'd take it.

"You provide your own linen," Mr. Steelman said.

"But the agent told me it was completely furnished," I protested.

"It's furnished. What do you call this furniture? I'll tell you what I'll do. Being I like the looks of you young people, I'll throw in sheets and towels and blankets for the whole summer, and all it will cost you is fifty dollars more. Three-fifty for the season."

He reminded me of Hank. All landlords were the same, I thought.

"All right," I said.

Mr. Steelman crouched at an electric switch box close to the floor and rose saying that we could use the stove at once and would have hot water in an hour. We drove back to his house. I had no blank checks; I used one of his, writing in the name of my bank. While I wrote it out, Elsa haggled with him over the number of towels and blankets. She won; he had met his match. I realized that I would have saved a hundred dollars if I had let her handle the negotiations from the start.

But it didn't matter. We had a home, a dream come true. As we drove up to the bungalow for the second time, Elsa said, "I've never seen anything lovelier."

I knew exactly what she meant.

We dumped the linens and blankets on the mattress. As

soon as our arms were free, we filled them with each other.

After a brief minute she disentangled herself from me. "I need a shower desperately. After that we'll go out to stock up on groceries."

"The water isn't hot yet."

"I've become hardened to cold water in Hank's creek." She kicked off her shoes and started for the bathroom.

"Modest, sweetheart?" I said. "Is it necessary to undress with a door between us?"

She turned with her hand on the doorknob and smiled. "Of course not." She pulled the polo shirt over her head and stepped out of her skirt. That still left her in what she had been wearing for two days. The halter came off. She drew in her breath and smiled at me again, pausing a long, taut moment before she stepped out of her black shorts.

I kept myself from going to her. I stood watching the lift of her splendid breasts as she raised her arms to undo her hair. Once before I had seen her with nothing on, but that had been a brief and guilty glimpse, and last night in the car it had been totally dark. I thought that I would never want to stop looking at her like that—at the smooth, ripe, strong womanliness of her. And then her hair was down, the corn-silk flowing against bronzed skin, and she was still facing me, letting me see her, desiring me to see her.

"Now may I take my shower?" she said, half tauntingly, but with a queer constriction in her voice.

"Do you want to—at once?"

"No," she said.

I gathered her to me. Presently I released her and started to pull off the bed the stuff we had dropped on it.

"Wait," she said. "This is our home. Let's have a properly made-up bed."

I could wait. It was sheer delight to watch her move about as she spread a sheet on the mattress and stuffed the two pillows into pillowcases. I came up behind her

as she patted the pillows into place. I seized her and she let herself fall forward on the bed, pulling me along with her.

"My wife," I said later. "We'll have a proper marriage as well as a proper bed. We'll go get a license this afternoon."

"I'll be no good for you."

"What nonsense!"

"What will your family and friends think of me?"

"They'll be as proud of you as I am."

"Will they be proud of me when they find out I was a gangster's mistress?"

"I won't let you speak like that about yourself. You're as decent as any woman."

"How do you know?"

"I've got eyes and ears and, I hope, something in my head. You're going to be my wife."

"No."

Playfully I knelt astride her and pinned her arms down on the bed. "Say yes and I'll let you up."

She lay limp, her eyes somberly staring up at me, and suddenly I didn't feel at all playful.

"What's the use?" she said. "You can't take me back to your home because of Stan. You can't go back to your job."

"We have a good six weeks ahead of us here. By then something will have happened."

"I know. He'll have caught up to us."

"Here? How the devil can he?"

"He will."

I was again lying flat on my back beside her. "Assuming you're right—I don't for a moment say you are, but assuming it for a moment—that's no argument against us getting married."

"I have as much of you as I ever will have. I mustn't expect more."

"You haven't given your real reason."

"I'm only part of your caper."

"You know better."

She said listlessly, "There were two women in your caper. I'm the second."

"Don't dare compare Jeanie to you."

"You made love to her too."

"And you made love to Stan. That puts us even. I was a damn fool to get into it, but if I hadn't I would never have met you. I love you. Do you love me?"

"You know I do."

"Then that's all that counts."

"Is it?" she said, and slipped off the bed. "The water should be warm now."

She had her shower and then I had mine. When I came out, she was dressed, waiting for me. We had hardly a word to say to each other.

Halfway to Honey Point I stopped the car.

"Elsa, are you going to let Stan stay between us?" I said. "After all, that's what it all comes down to."

"Can we help it?" she said.

I put my arms about her and she clung to me. Her mouth tasted salty—like tears.

Chapter Twenty-two

WHILE Elsa shopped in the food market, I sweated in a phone booth trying to get through to my brother, George, in his office. I juggled the quarters in my hand, trying to recall what the toll was from New York City to Kentucky and adding a dollar because this was almost three hundred miles farther north.

Whatever the sum was, I couldn't afford it. After I had paid for our late lunch and had bought for myself no more than a pair of denim pants and a couple of T shirts and a razor, we'd had twenty-three dollars left. Elsa had taken eighteen of that into the food market, pointing out that it wouldn't go far because she had to stock our larder from scratch. I considered reversing the toll charge and decided that it wouldn't do to get off on the wrong foot with George.

His voice came on for an instant before the operator cut him off to demand payment. After the clanging of quarters died away, George said, "Hello, hello."

"This is Larry."

"Where the devil are you?" he said.

"Somewhere in the Adirondacks. How are Alice and the kids?"

"Fine. Larry, what have you been up to? Marjorie has phoned twice and in between has been sending incoherent letters. As far as I can dope out, she found you with a naked woman in the apartment."

"Not quite naked."

"Alice said she hoped it was true. You know how Alice talks. Marjorie says you went off with this woman and you haven't been in touch with her since."

"I haven't had a chance to write."

"What's she like? Are you with her now?"

"Well, not with her. I'm with somebody else."

"You dog," George said cheerfully. "Alice will love this. What are you doing, changing them for new models every few days?"

"It's no joke. We're going to be married this week."

"Oh." After an uneasy pause, George said, "Is she nice?"

"She's wonderful. We intend to spend the rest of the summer here. It so happens I ran completely out of cash, and I can't cash a check because nobody knows me here. I was going to open a bank account today, but we got into town a few minutes after the bank closed at two-thirty. I'll have to wait until tomorrow, and then it will take days, maybe a week, for the check I'll deposit to clear. Meanwhile I'm flat broke."

"I'll wire you money right away."

"That's the rub. There's no telegraph office around here. Besides, I've lost my wallet and can't identify myself. Why don't you send me cash by registered special-delivery airmail? I need a hundred. No, make it two hundred."

"All that cash by mail?"

"I'll risk it. Of course, I'll pay you back."

"I just sent the girl out to make a deposit, so there's little cash in the office, but I'll try to scrape up two hundred and drop it in the mail today."

"Swell. My address is care of Steelman, R. F. D. One, Honey Point, New York."

"Let me write it down. I've got it. And, Larry, call Marjorie, will you? At least write her. She's worried sick about you."

"She's worried because I'm with a woman. She'll have to get used to it."

"That's true. But write her."

"All right."

The operator broke in to tell us that our time was up.

"You haven't told me her name," George said over the operator's voice.

"Elsa."

"Bring her to see us when—"

We were disconnected. I hung up and went next door to the food market, where Elsa was having her order checked out.

The tiny bungalow looked better, more homelike, every time we rolled up to it. We stacked away the groceries on the open shelves and in the refrigerator and I helped Elsa prepare a lavish dinner. I felt contentedly domestic. She washed the dishes while I dried. Everything we did we wanted to do together.

As she stood at the sink, I kissed the nape of her neck below her piled-up hair. "Happy?" I said.

"Very." Then abruptly her tone changed. "Darling, are the guns still in the car?"

"I haven't touched them."

"Don't you think we ought to keep one in the house?"

The cheeriness of the bright little kitchen vanished.

"If it will make you feel better," I said.

I went out and fetched the automatic pistol from under the car seat. The hard, deadly feel of it stretched my nerves. I laid it down on the table.

"Do you know how to use it?" she said.

"I'm not bad with a rifle, but I've never fired one of these."

"I'll show you how."

She unloaded it. There were seven cartridges in the chamber. She told me that the gun was a .38 caliber, that it wouldn't kick as badly as a .45—for example, the gun Ronnie had had—but the tendency would still be to hit the ceiling or even put the bullet into your own head if you weren't careful. She showed me how to thumb off the safety catch and how to squeeze the stock rather than simply pull the trigger.

As she reloaded the gun, I said, "I hope you don't expect me to go around with it in my hip pocket."

"I don't suppose it will be any use to us anyway, but as long as we have it . . ."

She stuck it into the top drawer of the dresser.

We had a lot of sleep to make up for those two fitful

and cramped nights we had spent in the car. We went to bed early.

During the night she woke me, "Darling, did you lock the door?"

"I think so."

"Make sure."

I got out of bed and found the door locked.

"What about the windows?" she said.

"We can't sleep with them shut tight. But the screens are locked."

"Are you sure?"

I made the rounds of the windows. I put out the light and crawled back into bed.

"There's not a chance he can find us buried away here," I argued.

"He will," she said. "Somehow."

Wednesday morning the money arrived from George. Now that we were again solvent, I returned to my insistence on marriage.

This time she didn't fight me.

"If you wish," she said.

"The point is, what do you wish?"

"I want to do whatever makes you happy."

"Then let's go get the license," I said.

We put on our best clothes, our going-to-town clothes, our one change of clothes. She wore her high-necked polo shirt and flaring gingham skirt, I the slacks and sport shirt I had had on my back when we had fled Hank's place and which she had since washed and pressed. We looked presentable enough. We set out for the town clerk's office in Honey Point.

On the way I said, "This is a hell of a note. I propose to you and you finally accept, and you show as much enthusiasm as if we were going out to buy a pack of cigarettes."

"You can hardly expect me to be a blushing bride." Her hands were quietly folded on her lap. "The truth is, darling, I'm happier than I've ever been in my life."

"But haunted by Stan," I said.

"It's not only Stan. I'm afraid of my past. Perhaps in some way we can get away from Stan, but I can't get away from my past. Sooner or later it will come out. How will you feel about me being your wife when I'm in jail?"

"Chances are I'll be in jail with you. You forget I made myself an accessory after the fact. But I doubt that the police will bother to get very tough with either of us."

"Perhaps not, but it will be in the papers. Everybody you know and respect will read about how your wife had once lived with a gangster."

"So we're back to that?"

"Yes. Marriage isn't only love and kisses."

"But love and kisses will help us through anything."

She was silent and then said, "Darling, you're really very naïve."

"Just a boy at heart."

"You are," she said, "and I love you for it. I'll be proud and happy to be Mrs. Lawrence Knight."

The town clerk was not exactly dozing in his swivel chair, but I had to speak to him twice before he sat up. He wrote out forms, handed us his pen with which to sign here and there, gave us the address of a local doctor for our blood tests, told us we would have to wait seventy-two hours.

"Will your office be open Saturday?" I asked.

"Till twelve." He leered amiably at Elsa. "I'd be in a hurry myself if I was twenty years younger. Prettiest one we've had here all year."

Elsa blushed, very much like a bride now. I said we'd be seeing him in seventy-two hours, and we went to get our blood tests.

We spent the rest of that day shopping, mostly for the clothes we needed so badly. When George's two hundred dollars were down to fifty, we called a halt. The cashier of the Honey Point National Bank had assured me that by Monday I would be able to draw on my account.

We discovered a wooded lake with a public beach some dozen miles from our bungalow, and Thursday and Fri-

day we swam and lay in the sun and drifted in a hired canoe.

Saturday morning we dressed in brand-new clothes and drove to Honey Point to be married. A girl from the town clerk's office and a man from one of the other offices were the witnesses. Elsa kissed the clerk and the male witness and I kissed only Elsa, and we were man and wife.

When we passed Mr. Steelman's house, he called out that he had a letter for me. I stopped the car and went up on his porch. Without breaking the rhythm of his rocking chair, he handed me a letter.

"Came for you this morning," he said.

My name and address were in Marjorie's stubby script. I stared at it so long that Mr. Steelman asked me if it was bad news.

"No," I said, and stuck the letter into my hip pocket.

"Who's it from?" Elsa asked when I reached the car.

"From my brother, George," I lied.

"Aren't you going to read it?"

"There's no rush. No doubt he wants me to send him a check for the two hundred."

I carried her over the threshold. She squealed a great deal. She was gayer than I had ever known her, even carefree. My mood had changed to exactly the opposite, but I tried not to show it.

Later I locked myself in the bathroom and read Marjorie's letter. There wasn't anything in it I couldn't have guessed beforehand.

She wrote that Wednesday she had phoned George again. I hadn't dropped her even a card and she was awfully, awfully worried. George told her I was getting married and gave her my address. Who was the woman? Evidently I thought so little of my only sister that I didn't even bring the woman home to meet her first. She hoped it wasn't the tart she had found naked in the apartment. George said it wasn't, but after the insane way I had acted she wouldn't be surprised if it was that tart or another tart. She was very lonely. Why didn't I write her?

It was becoming harder and harder for her to get around on her swollen legs and she was awfully, awfully alone. Who was the woman?

I tore the letter and envelope into bits and flushed them down the drain. I didn't want Elsa to know that I had received a letter addressed here to me from my sister.

While Elsa was preparing dinner, I had a peek in the top dresser drawer. The pistol was there. And the rifle was in the car.

How much could I do with either?

That night we made a ritual of going to bed.

"Let's pretend this is the first time for both of us," she said. "I'm the timid bride and you're the awkward groom."

Anything she wanted. I couldn't let her discover that this time I was the one who was distraught.

In the spirit of the game, she undressed in the bathroom. When I had my pajamas on, I called to her. She came out with a coy show of modesty in a nightgown she had bought that day—a coral nylon mist over the bronze lusciousness of her. And indeed it was like the first time, like the first discovery of her body. And in a way for me it was as if this would also be the last time, as if now and never again would I experience the miracle of our blending love.

Then she slept, awakening briefly to cuddle down against me, muttering, "My husband!" and drifting back to sleep.

I lay wide-eyed, staring into the darkness, listening to the night sounds of insects. I was certain that I could keep awake all night because it would be impossible for me to fall asleep if I tried.

But it was out of sleep that Elsa roused me, whispering, "I thought I heard somebody," and instantly I was alert, straining to hear.

The overhead light went on, and there in the room were Stan and Jeanie.

Chapter Twenty-three

His gun was held loosely, almost carelessly. Stubby and broad in a conservatively cut brown worsted suit, he advanced to the foot of the bed.

Jeanie closed the door and stood with her back against it.

Before having gone to bed, I had made doubly sure that the door was locked, and I had closed and locked all the windows but one. I turned my head, and there was the hole low in the screen of the one open window. He had cut it out with a knife and reached a hand through and unhooked the screen; then he had climbed through the window and turned the key in the door to admit Jeanie. Elsa had heard him, but by the time she had awakened me it was too late.

"Stan!" Elsa was staring up at the terrible bleakness of his face at the foot of the bed. "Stan, listen," she whispered, and lost her voice.

"I'm listening," he said tonelessly.

He was in no great hurry. He could have shot us down as we slept, but that would have made it too easy for us, too simple for him. He wanted us to know it was coming, watch it come, live through a lifetime of hell before it came. And there was another reason he delayed. He was driven by self-preservation as well as hate, and he had to find out if we had done or said or written anything that would further increase the menace of the police.

Patiently he waited for Elsa to recover her voice.

I could feel her gather her breath as she lay beside me under the blanket. "Stan, we don't intend you any harm. It's been a whole week. If we were going to go to the police, wouldn't we have done so already? I swear we never will."

He said; "I don't give one single goddamn what you swear. Get out of that bed."

Slowly I was drawing my hand up under the cover.

"Stan, you can't!" Elsa pleaded. "After what we've been to each other. Stan, listen!"

"I listened," he said. "So you didn't blabber yet. I'm here to make sure you don't."

Elsa twisted on her side and threw her arms around me. She shouldn't have done that. In another second or two I might have got my hand under the pillow. Her weight pinned that arm down.

But she didn't know. She held onto me in frenzy. "You can't, Stan. Let's talk it over. Stan!"

"Get out of that bed."

Jeanie spoke for the first time. The voice that tore quivering with viciousness from her throat was a voice I had never before heard.

"What're you waiting for? Give it to 'em."

The gun in Stan's hand became less casual. Its muzzle definitely pointed.

Elsa rolled away from me. "I'll get out, Stan. Look, I'm getting out."

She tumbled off the bed, pulling the blanket along with her. She had gained nothing. He preferred us to die apart rather than in each other's arms, and now he had separated us.

I said desperately, "You're not going to kill her."

"No?" He seemed curious to know why I was so sure. He glanced at her cowering against the chair in her nylon nightgown—in that coral mist scarcely concealing the flesh he knew even better than I. "No?" he said again, returning his bleak gaze to me.

I lay uncovered, in pajamas, the blanket hanging half off the bed, and my right hand was wholly visible. I could only talk.

"You'll hate yourself," I said. "If you kill her, you'll never be able to live with yourself."

Something came into his eyes, the shadow of a shadow, the smallest of doubts. Hope started to stir in me. Pos-

sibly, just barely possibly, that doubt might have grown if Elsa had let it alone.

"Stan, listen to me," she implored. "I didn't cheat on you. We couldn't help falling in love. It's not just an affair. We were married this morning. We—"

"Married?" The shadow of doubt froze to death in his eyes. "You wouldn't marry me. I turned the country upside down looking for the guy you thought was your husband so you could get a divorce. Four years I looked, and I found him, and it turned out you weren't married to him. This heel came along and right away you . . ."

His voice faded tiredly. Over the foot of the bed his face hovered, the grayness seeping into it, and now it was much older than it had been a week ago—the face of death.

She had said too much, though silence wouldn't have changed anything. The vague, unreal hope had been no hope at all, for there were too many circles within circles, too many separate reasons why it was essential for the man he was to destroy us.

"Do it!" Jeanie shrieked. She might have been a stranger standing against the door, tall in a long green dress and high-heeled shoes, those normally pretty, childlike features—the small mouth, the clear eyes, the smooth cheeks—twisted and broken by driving fury. "Why don't you do it?"

I saw it then. It seemed to me that for some time I had known, but I hadn't believed, or hadn't wanted to believe; but her expression and her words made me sure.

"Jeanie fingered Bertie Bride," I blurted.

For all I could tell, his hand had already started to squeeze the gun. But what I said checked him. This was something he absolutely had to hear.

"Huh?" he said.

I had brought my hands up as high as my shoulders. I lay under his gun as if crucified.

"Think about it," I said. "Why was Bertie Bride the only one of you the police connected with the caper? How did they find out where he was staying and under

what name? Why did Jeanie have a bag packed and ready, with the money in it and several complete changes of clothes?"

"He's just saying any old thing that comes into his head," Jeanie countered.

"Maybe." Stan didn't take his eyes off me. "Go on."

At the side of the bed the pink mist that was Elsa shimmered and subsided. I could hear her breathe, and I could hear the beating of my own heart.

I said, "Jeanie came along with you to be in on the kill. Jeanie, who cared for me, who wouldn't let me leave her, who even blackmailed me into remaining her lover. Now she wants me dead because I'm with another woman. She's like you, Stan. Essentially a primitive. Love violently and hate violently and react to any disagreeable problem with violence."

"You were saying she fingered Bertie," he reminded me.

"In June he beat her black and blue. From what she's told me, I gathered she started to dislike him before that, but stayed on with him from habit or for convenience or simply because he was a man. Another girl would have left him after that beating. Not Jeanie. That wasn't her way; she couldn't let him get off so easily. The caper was being planned. She could wait until after it was pulled off. If she worked it right, she could kill him as surely as if she held the gun herself, and nobody would know. Also—though I believe this was less important to her—she would get his share of the loot."

"All he ever does is talk, talk, talk," Jeanie said peevishly. "You going to listen to him all night, Stan?"

"It makes sense," he observed softly.

"That morning in Darson she phoned the police," I went on. "They arrived quicker than she expected. She was still in the room when the street shooting started, but she managed to get away." I dared hardly pause for breath. I made myself sneer. "I don't know if Bertie Bride was her first victim. I'm slated to be her second. And after me it will be you, Stan, because now she fears

you. She knows the code as well as anybody. A squealer must die."

"He's lying!" she cried shrilly.

His gun was again held casually. But in an instant he could bring the muzzle back to bear on me, and he would.

"We'll see about you later," he said, speaking to Jeanie but looking at me.

I said, "Do you imagine she'll wait until later? She won't take the chance now that you know. She has a gun in her handbag. She always keeps it near her. She'll—"

Stan turned to her then. I looked completely defenseless lying on the bed with my arms outflung, and he had to see what she was doing behind him. He saw her standing near the door with her hands not touching her straw handbag, which hung over her shoulder.

I snatched the gun from under the pillow and shot him.

The gun bucked wildly against my palm. I gripped it with both hands and kept squeezing. It was a very short distance from where I sat on the bed, and he stood at the foot of it with his face turned from me. Seven bullets couldn't miss him. Some of them didn't.

Two women were screaming.

I glimpsed Elsa move and pass out of my line of vision. Directly ahead of me Stan had sunk out of sight below the footboard, and at the door Jeanie was clawing at her straw handbag.

The smallness of the room helped. I was off the bed and had reached Jeanie before she could get the little gun out. I grabbed her wrist and twisted, and the sound of her pain hurt my ears. The little gun fell to the floar.

Elsa crouched over Stan. She lifted her face. "He's dead," she said.

Chapter Twenty-four

We stood in the bungalow doorway and watched Jeanie disappear into the night.

"I had to let her go," I said. "I couldn't turn her over to the police."

Elsa put a hand on my arm. "What will become of her?"

"She'll get along. She won't have trouble finding another man."

In the distance we heard a car engine start. We followed its progress from first speed to second and then the sound of it died.

The night remained silent. Mr. Steelman was our only neighbor within a mile. Probably he wasn't home, if the shots and screams hadn't brought him.

I entered the bungalow and placed on the table the two guns—the big one with which I had shot and killed Stan and the little one I had taken away from Jeanie.

He lay at the foot of the bed, his body curled like a weary child's, his dead eyes staring under the bed. I looked away from him and saw Elsa beside me.

"You had the gun under the pillow," she said.

"I expected him. The letter was from my sister. I hadn't written her because I had to keep our address, even our postmark, from her. But George gave her the address. I should have thought of that possibility. So there was the letter and I knew what would happen. Stan would call on Marjorie and pretend he was a friend who urgently had to get in touch with me. I imagine he visited her earlier this week, before she had the address, but he kept in touch with her by phone. And when she got it, she saw no reason for not letting him know."

"You didn't tell me about the letter."

"I didn't want to frighten you. And I knew you would insist we start running again, and I was damned if I would. It had to be settled here and now. I thought of having the police set a trap for him, but you'd convinced me he could get us even from prison. No, it was my job. I assumed he would make his play at night. And he did. He had only our R.F.D. address; it took time for them to narrow down the search. They must have done that much during the day and then waited for the middle of the night. And I expected them—him, anyway. I stuck the gun under the mattress, and after you were asleep I put it under my pillow. I intended to be ready when he tried to get in, but I botched it." I felt my mouth twist. "I'm not much good at this kind of thing. I kept making mistakes."

She shifted her feet so that her back would be toward the dead man. "Was what you told him about Jeanie true?"

"Probably. I had to keep talking. He was very good with a gun and I was very bad. I had to divert his attention from me, and I did it by telling him why Jeanie had fingered Bertie." I ran my hand over my face. "I had to kill him. There was no alternative."

"I know," she muttered.

"Steelman has a phone," I said. "I'll call the police from there."

"Wait. Nobody has to know what happened here tonight."

I looked at her. "You mean bury his body the way Ronnie's body was buried and keep everything from the police?"

"We could."

"We couldn't and we mustn't." I said. "The caper is over for both of us. Whatever there will be to face, we'll face together."

"Yes," she said. "We'll face it."

We dressed and hand in hand we went out into the night.

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